ゼロから始める魔法の書

虎走かける
Illustration
しずまよしのり

電撃文庫

Volume 1

Zero Kara Hajimeru Mahou no Sho

by Kobashiri Kakeru (Ill. Shizuma Yoshinori)

Volume One

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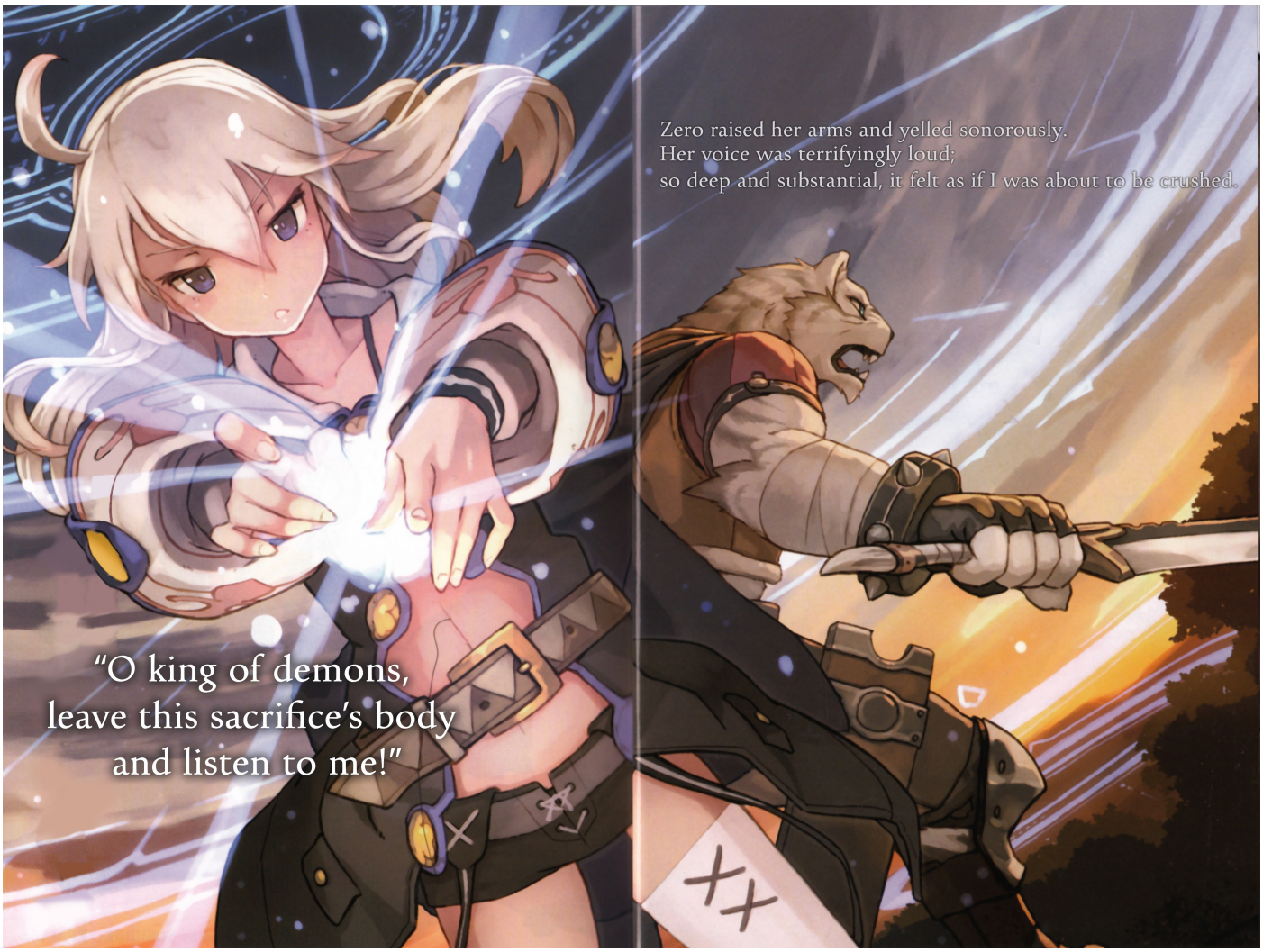
Illustrations

Looking up after confirming
my course of travel, I froze.
A hooded figure, illuminated by
the flickering flame, was—
Beast Mercenary
A half-man, half beast who dreams of becoming a human.
"Hey, stop helpin' yerself to mah soup!"

Without thinking, I looked at Zero's lips.
If I touched hers with mine, it would
undoubtedly be sacrilege.
Albus
A young magician who is said
to know the whereabouts of
"The Book of Zero".
"Kiss? Why all this fixation
on the lips? Is it some sort of ritual?
...Do you want to try it with me, mercenary?"
Zero
A witch journeying in search for "The Book of Zero",
unversed in the ways of the world.


"O king of demons,
leave this sacrifice's body
and listen to me!"
Zero raised her arms and yelled sonorously.
Her voice was terrifyingly loud;
so deep and substantial, it felt as if I was about to be crushed.

Prologue

Volume 1 — Prologue

While dusk dyed the world red, something was burning.

As if it were a watchfire, the searing blaze spawned a suffocating column of smoke that pierced the heavens.

The smell of burning flesh.

The words of a prayer being read.

The clanging of a church bell.

The cheering of the crowd rang around the square, with the flame that burned away evil in the center.

From the front of the crowd, I watched the burning witch. While I was cheering at the sight of her sobbing and writhing figure…

“The river overflowed from unbelievably heavy rain. The flood killed many people and washed half the fields away. I hear it’s all that witch’s fault.”

The voices spread from the center of the crowd, from one agreeing, “scary, huh…” to a shrill voice yelling “give my family back, you murderer!” A stone flew through the air, just barely striking the squirming witch.

“It really is scary, huh… I’ve heard about witches only in gossip lately, but one was actually this close… where the heck was she hiding…? She kidnapped babies to use as sacrifices, right? I heard there was a mountain of corpses in her hideout.”

“It’s the Knights of the Church who found the witch’s lair, you know. They usually look like they’re just lounging around, but when it really matters, you can definitely depend on the Church for help. Only god can stop the witches’ demons.”

At last, the struggling, writhing, and screaming witch ceased to move, her figure a lone shadow amidst the brilliant flames. *Sure serves you right, doesn’t it, witch?*

Inwardly celebrating, I smirked.

“Hear me, believers!” the priest who burned the witch and recited the prayer proclaimed.

“Here, we have triumphed over evil! The vile witch who practiced sorcery, summoned demons, and spread terror and chaos is no more!”

“Hooray!” the crowd exulted.

Cheers of “long live the Church!” rang through the air, as the fire flared with the crowd’s enthusiasm.

It was the year 526.
In this world, witches practiced the well-established art of sorcery…
While the emerging art of *magic* was still in its infancy. (1)

TRANSLATOR NOTES

(1) See Terminology for the definitions of the terms “magic” and “sorcery”. They are also given in chapter two.

Chapter 1

Chapter One — The Witch and the Fallen Beast

ゼロから始める魔法の書
一章 魔女と獣堕ち

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Part 1

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Volume 1 — Chapter 1: The Witch and the Fallen Beast

Part 1

Today, I said goodbye to the dark depths.

The summer sun was blinding, so I pulled my hood firmly over my head, shading my eyes. Compared to the coolness of the limestone cave, the heat of the outdoors felt suffocating.

I wasn't used to the sunlight.

Still, the sight of clouds drifting across the blue, boundless sky and the comfortable humidity in the forest were refreshing.

This is the outside, huh? I thought. It looked just like the sketches in the books, except that nothing could replicate the vividness of these colors, nor all the movement that was going on.

Bugs were flying. Birds were chirping. Animals were cantering. Watching all of this, I walked along with bare feet. It was comfortable to walk on the moist, fallen leaves. It hurt to walk over the pebbles, twigs, and other debris.

The scents of damp dirt, crushed leaves, and rotting fruit mixed together to form a strangely calming odor which filled the air.

I glanced back at the cave.

The darkness had been cozy and comforting. I felt a little nostalgic leaving, but I'd waited for far too long.

I had finished interminable books, and resolved unresolvable debates. It felt like an eternity passed while I was there. I had thought I could spend an eternity there.

But I was just a bit tired of it all. I could wait no longer.

"I am leaving, Thirteenth."

Having announced my decision, I felt like I had a burden lifted off my chest.

Raising my finger with the palm of my hand toward the sky, I pointed at the entrance of the cave.

The mouth of the cave made a sound and collapsed, becoming a simple pile of rubble.

An image of Thirteenth frowning came to mind. I cackled.

A little while later, while walking through the forest, I came across a small stream. It was the very same stream I had crossed a bit earlier. How curious. How could I run into the same stream when I haven't changed direction even once?

I groaned, and jumped across the stream again. When I turned around to check, the stream I had just crossed was nowhere to be found.

"A barrier? What an unpleasantly meticulous fellow. He knew all along that I would break my promise."

I had promised to wait. I had planned to keep that promise, but it was his fault for making me wait so long. I've already had enough of waiting around. I've waited alone for too long.

What to do now? I pondered for a few seconds. Speaking quickly, I slashed my arm through the air—.

"The Book of Harvesting, verse eight: «Kudola»!"

Immediately, a thunderous roar reverberated through the air, and part of the forest was blown away.

—A number of days passed…

•••••

I [1] had often thought that forests at dusk exuded charm.

The rays of the summer sun had softened, and they would dull even further as fall approached.

The forest was plunged into darkness as soon the sun began to set below the treetops. By the time the gloomy forest was bathed in the setting sun's crimson glow, wayfarers would have finished preparing for the night. They would then extinguish their campfires, cover themselves with their cloaks, and wait for daylight to return to the pitch-black woods.

Today at dusk, in the forest with my eyes hurting from the setting sun's glare, I was running for my life.

The charm of a forest at dusk? My life was in jeopardy! Mowing through the bushes and branches in my way, I slid behind a large tree and paused for a moment to catch my breath. Then—

"The Book of Hunting, Verse Four — «Redæst»!"

The thick tree blew away, accompanied by the sound of an explosion. I was thrown aside and crashed into the ground.

Was that an explosive—? Is there a stockpile of odorless explosives somewhere?

I was being attacked with weapons whose natures I did not understand, so I had no other choice but to keep running.

Shit, shit, shit—!

Hearing the sound of approaching footsteps behind me, I hurriedly got up and sprinted away while an angry, strangely high-pitched voice cried out. My eardrums were busted because of the explosion, so the sounds of my surroundings were muted. My sense of balance was also out of whack, so my knees wobbled with every step I took.

But this wasn't the time to rest.

There was no doubt that I would die if I stopped running.

I would undoubtedly be beheaded, then skinned, and my hide used for decoration. I didn't know if I was being chased by bandits or someone looking to skin me, but I knew for sure that it wasn't someone to sit down and have a nice chat with.

The muddy, mushy forest floor and snaking tree roots made running difficult. Arrows of pure heat flew past, grazing my cheeks as they impaled themselves into tree trunks and disappeared.

I finally realized what my assailant was.

Oh, dammit, shit—!

“Screw you, witch! You should all go kill yourselves! I wasn’t born to be one of your damn sacrifices!!”

There had been rumors going around that the witches of this country used sorcery that no one had ever seen before.

I had been doubtful then, but if someone had shown me these arrows of light which dissipated upon impact, I would have been completely convinced.

This was the worst possible scenario—my adversary was a witch.

That I was able to figure out the identity of my assailant was good and all, but the fact that it was a witch put my life in much more danger. I ran more and more frantically.

Suddenly, my foot caught on something—a tree root.

To make matters worse, there was no ground in front of me—it was a cliff.

Please at least give me a soft landing, or let me land in a river.

Praying to God, who didn’t exist no matter how much one believed in him, I fell over the ledge and tumbled toward the ground below.

It was fortunate that the place from which I fell wasn’t very high up… but it was unfortunate that there was a traveler stirring a pot of stew in my landing zone, instead of a river.

—Really, how unlucky was I.

No, the unlucky one was the traveler I was going to flatten. Robed from head to toe, the traveler looked very slender and frail. I was a giant compared to this person.

Sorry, please forgive me. If you get crushed to death, I’ll dig a grave for you. If I have the spare time, that is.

The next moment, I struck the ground and went head over heels as an intense pain erupted from my abdomen.

“Ah, A……Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

From nearby came a shriek of despair.

It seemed that the traveler had somehow managed to avoid my sudden plunge from the cliff, but had sacrificed her soup to do so. *I’m so sorry.*

Groaning, I was getting up when the trembling traveler grabbed my neck and began shaking me back and forth.

“You bastard!! How dare you waste the soup I stewed myself?! Do you even know how much time it took for me to make that soup?! It’s utterly incomparable to simply roasting a

wild animal! H-How-How dare yo—!”

“W-W-Wait, wait, calm down! I’m really sorry, but this ain’t the time to be angry!”

“This…isn’t the time? What could be a bigger problem than my soup—“

“Watch out, idiot!”

Yelling, I immediately shielded the traveler with my body, flattening us both against the ground. It was just in time, as bolts of heat once again flew past overhead.

“…I see, so there does appear to be a bigger problem.”

“Good thing you got it so quickly; lets go!”

I slung the wayfarer over my shoulder and ran. I wondered why I was bringing this person along.

“Hey, why are you taking me with you?”

It seemed like the burden on my shoulder was thinking the same thing. *We’d get along, wouldn’t we, traveler?* I thought for a moment.

“Just happened!”

I answered honestly. But, in hindsight, leaving this burden behind as a distraction would probably have been the smarter choice.

Is it too late to change my mind?

“You… you are being pursued, are you not?”

Without hearing my treacherous thoughts, the weight on my shoulder had finally figured out what was going on. Anyone else would have caught on immediately.

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, but there’s someone tryna kill me!”

“…What did you do?”

“I didn’t do nothin’! They just wanna sacrifice me—a male fallen beast!” I couldn’t stand its disapproving tone, so I literally roared.

Fallen beasts were half man, half beast; so-called monsters. Nobody knew why, but monsters with the bodies of animals, just like me, were sometimes born to perfectly normal parents.

Witches desired the heads of the fallen to use them as tools for practicing sorcery. As a result, I was prized by those who wanted to try and sell my head to the witches. Namely, every single crook and shady person there was.

The first attack came when I turned thirteen—in other words, it was my fault that bandits ransacked my village. I was but a weak child then, so I wasn’t able to protect my village from the armed bandits.

I was able to live on, at the cost of three human lives.

So I, like many other fallen, left home and became a mercenary. To escape the ruffians, I had to become one of them. Since then, I’ve fought in the battlefield on the side of desperate country after desperate country.

Mercenaries were warmongers. They were hired by one side of a conflict, and fought to the death with mercenaries hired by the other. Whether it was a war between empires, a skirmish between fiefdoms, or a border dispute between minor clans—it was depressing, but even to the point of being participants in a bloody brawl; mercenaries didn't lack job opportunities.

Among the mercenaries, the fallen were the best fighters, so they were welcomed in every conflict. Thanks to this, one way or another, they didn't fit into the rigidly structured mercenary groups, and were able to remain independent.

Rather, it should be said that fallen beasts weren't allowed to live any other way.

It didn't matter what country, what city, what village; fallen beasts weren't welcome. Even the church treated us as vile creatures, so to a normal human, there was no way that we were seen as anything but frightening.

Furthermore, because of the witches' craving for the heads of fallen, highwaymen had been taking the initiative, luring fallen beasts into ambushes. Still, this was the first time I had been attacked directly by a witch. *Looks like I've been pretty lucky so far.*

I had only thought of witches as nothing but malicious puppeteers before, but from today onward, I'll regard them as real threats.

But for now, I needed to focus on escaping.

Screech— a squeal rent through the air; I immediately ducked behind a tree. The bolt of light impaled its trunk, making it crack and topple over.

"Shit—how the hell does she do that?! Since when could witches use sorcery as semiautomatic crossbows?!"

I had heard that witches were able to do the impossible with sorcery, but this was beyond my imagination. Cursing, I started running again.

I wasn't particularly knowledgeable about witches and sorcery, but everyone knew that witches needed to complete major rituals as part of practicing sorcery. After completing a ritual that took months to complete, a witch would be able to gain powers which could be used to easily destroy a country. There were plenty of heroic tales about the Knights of the Church defeating such witches before they could complete the required ceremonies.

Practicing sorcery required large amounts of time, so witches sequestered themselves in their lairs, relying on their numerous minions for protection while they focused on completing the necessary rituals. —At least, that's how I had thought it worked.

Nothing I knew of could explain how this witch possessed the ability to run while rapidly shooting bolts of light and, without gunpowder, blow up a large tree.

I was extremely confused. At any rate, I wasn't going to live long enough to find out how unless I kept running.

"Is that 'Staim'…?"

Unexpectedly, the weight on my shoulder said something.

Ignoring it, I continued to run until it began banging on my head.

“Hey, is there really a need to keep running?”

“Of course, dammit! I’ll die if I don’t!”

“That’s not true. —Alright, let me down.”

There and then, devoid of sympathy, I threw the burden off to the side. It told me to put it down, so I no longer felt any obligation to take it with me. *Farewell, wayfarer. I’ll keep on living.*

I had run only a few steps when I went headlong into the ground once again, this time because of an earthquake.

“Shit…that really hurt!”

Moaning, I somehow managed to look up. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

Shrieking and staggering, the pursuing witch fell to the ground as, swallowing up trees, the earth around her rose up and formed earthen walls which boxed her in. They soon extended out of sight.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

[1] Just in case, here’s a note indicating that the narrator of the first section is no longer narrating this section.

Part 2

Volume 1 — Chapter 1: The Witch and the Fallen Beast

Part 2

“How… what the heck is goin’ on?!”

I glanced at the traveler, not expecting to see anything out of the ordinary, but froze in shock.

The traveler’s hood had come off, revealing shimmering silver hair which billowed as if caught in a gale.

—A woman.

An exceedingly beautiful woman at that.

Although my life was in danger, I couldn’t help but recall how light and slender she had been in my arms. She had spoken in a confident, calm manner, but her voice had been too high-pitched to be a man’s. My male instincts were telling me that I should have felt her up more, among other things inappropriate in the current situation. What a waste.

But could it be?

This woman—was she doing this?

Besides her, the witch and I were the only ones here.

It was obvious that the witch was the target of the cataclysm, and just as obvious that I couldn’t pull off such tricks. There wasn’t any other way of looking at these facts.

In the blink of an eye, it was over.

The walls had formed a giant earthen box, which looked as natural as if it had always been there, yet stuck out like a sore thumb because of its intimidating presence.

“This is the Book of Capturing, verse three: Etraak. It would take a week to escape with something as weak as Staim. Using Edarest would allow her to get out easily—but she looked quite tired. She would need to rest for a while first. Now—I would like to hear an explanation for all of this.”

Her red lips curled into a cold smirk. I could now see that she had long eyelashes, barely obscuring unnaturally clear, blueish-purple irises which shone like gemstones.

I stayed where I was, mouth agape, staring at her like an idiot.

“You… you’re… a witch…?”

The woman turned to face me. As I expected, she possessed fear-inducing beauty. But, from the confident look that replaced her smirk, I could detect immaturity and innocence.

It was as if she had become a different person.

“Certainly—I am a witch. A witch of the Murky Black who extracts meaning from meaninglessness, and conjures forth something from nothing!”

Oh. Alright. I see. Got it.

Without further ado, I stood up… and ran out of there as fast as I could.

•••••

If there were one good thing about being born a fallen beast, it would be that my physical abilities far surpassed those of normal humans.

If I were to run at full speed, no one would be able to catch up. If I were to get into a fist fight with a normal human, he would die and I would walk away unharmed. This was the perfect body for fighting.

It seemed that I'd managed to lose the witch.

I raced through the forest, following a trail of bare dirt cutting through the grass. Breathing heavily, I hid behind a tree and warily scanned the woods in the direction from which I came. The forest was enveloped by darkness at this point, but I couldn't sense anyone in pursuit. However, I couldn't let my guard down just yet. After confirming that I was indeed completely safe, I breathed a sigh of relief and slid down into a sitting position with my back against the tree.

Seriously—what a disaster that was. I looked around for danger one last time, and began setting up camp in the dim moonlight.

Even if a witch possessed unrivaled beauty, she would still be my worst enemy. Even if I were so enthralled by a witch's beauty that I wanted to *let* her kill me, my instinct for self-preservation would still be stronger than my sexual desires. In any case, no one would grieve over the death of a fallen beast. I was the only person who would mourn my death.

The fallen were disliked throughout the world. Of course, the primary reason was that our appearances were strange, but because the majority of fallen beasts became mercenaries and bandits, we were essentially murderers. If I were a human parent, I would do everything I could to prevent my child from approaching fallen beasts. "Don't come into our villages, our shops, our sight—."

Ultimately speaking, there wasn't a single ally of the fallen beasts on the planet.

I was lucky to be a mercenary because I never had to worry about having enough to eat, but having to take the lives of others, whether I wanted to or not, bothered me.

All I wanted to do was to open a small bar somewhere, settle down with a lovable woman, and live a leisurely life until I died, but… unfortunately, the world wasn't going to allow me such pleasures.

"With an appearance like this…"

Sighing, I looked contemptuously at my fur-covered hand.

Most fallen beasts had bodies of large, carnivorous animals. Many possessed the bodies of bears and wolves, but I didn't know what animal I was. It was probably some feline, even though it would be too cruel for me to be a cat. My fur was white with light black stripes, although the white mostly won out over the black, creating a complex pattern. I was fairly certain that this was just an idiosyncrasy, but it made me stand out at night, so I used my black cloak to cover myself.

"Well, at least it looks better than havin' no pattern at all."

In an effort to cheer myself up, I forced a smile.

I was turning introspective, but in my youth, I had brooded over this to the extent of cutting myself and watching my blood well up. I had pondered until, eventually, it had hurt too much and I had been forced to give up. This had taken place right after I left my village. I had been living on a deserted mountain while covered in blood, eating birds and mice to sustain myself. I may have been able to reflect on my own nature because of that experience.

Anyhow, I was a monster, and no one would pity me if I perished. I would at least be motivated to live on if someone pitied me even the tiniest bit.

More than ten years have passed since then, and the wounds of that period have completely disappeared. Even the devastating loneliness I had felt has faded due to all the hardships I have endured since—no, the loneliness has only dulled.

At any rate, living alone was fun. Besides, there might be a woman in the world with strange enough tastes to reciprocate my love. I could only hope. I didn't believe those stories about even harlots refusing to provide company to fallen beasts, but—

"If only I were a cuter animal…"

For instance, although I didn't know if there were fallen beasts with bodies of cute wildlife like rabbits, they would certainly receive better treatment than fallen like me, who had the bodies of carnivorous beasts.

I stirred my soup and worried about things I couldn't do anything about.

I accidentally left behind the rabbit I had killed before the witch started chasing me, so I had to make a soup out of herbs I found nearby and some dried meat I saved for emergencies. I sprinkled some salt into the pot, and put in a chunk of animal fat that I had kept, wrapped in leather, in my bag. After tasting the soup, I added another pinch of salt. *Hmm, I guess this is as good as it'll get.* It just had to simmer a little while longer to let the flavors mingle properly. I rummaged through my bag and took out a compass and a map, which I unfolded on my lap.

—Map of the Vanias Kingdom, Revised Edition—

Many merchants go to the city of Foamicaum to sell their goods. There, one can find luxuries from around the world.

In the imperial capital of Prasta, there are performances in the city square every week on the day of the goddess.

Specialty: Roasted Ebru boar (A giant boar native to Vanias). Its flesh is tender and succulent.

Warning! Wild Ebru boars live in the woods. Hunting them is forbidden. Always stay on the road.

Reading the last line, I frowned.

"I'm not in the woods 'cause I wanna be, so gimme a break, eh?"

Speaking to no one in particular, I attempted to determine my current position from the

positions of the stars and the point on the map where I was attacked.

The Vanias Kingdom was located roughly at the center of the continent. It was formerly an isolated state surrounded by a mountain range, but by tunneling through the mountains, they were able to secure trade with neighboring countries, and successfully attracted numerous travelers and merchants.

The mountains were so difficult to cross that no matter how high the toll for entering Vanias was, travelers would pay up to use the tunnels. The underpass was unimaginably massive, and had so many inns that they were practically situated storefront to storefront. Here and there in the pitch-black tunnel, variegated colored lanterns lit up the surroundings and inns, which made such spots look like dreamscapes. If I were a child, there would be no doubt that I'd have been extremely excited. But nowadays, there was a rumor going around that the Vanias Kingdom was dealing with just a teeny tiny problem.

With the kingdom going through tough times, thievery was running rampant. Starting with the merchants, travelers began to avoid this country, because getting caught in combat would mean endangering their lives.

As a result, Vanias, which was built on revenue from wayfarers, was heading toward collapse. Of course, the kingdom's higher-ups dedicated themselves to solving the problem. The first thing they did was strengthen their country militarily—by hiring mercenaries. This information spread both inside and outside the kingdom, and reached the ears of mercenaries like me.

Such being the case, I was heading toward Prasta, the imperial capital of Vanias, to seek employment. According to the border patrol, the main force was to consist of fallen beasts, so I was ordered to take my letter of introduction and go to the capital, though this was fairly bothersome.

There were a great number of endemic species in Vanias, so to avoid their habitats, I had to take a winding path through the countryside. Owing to that, I couldn't part with my map. I traced my finger over the parchment, which was worn out from countless rewrites. From the path where I initially set up camp, through the woods to the path I was on now, that would mean Prasta was—.

"Thataway, eh?"

Looking up after confirming my course of travel, I froze. A hooded figure, illuminated by the flickering flame, was using a wooden ladle to drink my soup.

•••••

"AAH!"

As one would have expected, I screamed. Normally, I was extremely aware of my surroundings, even for a fallen beast. Nothing had ever successfully snuck up on me before. But even with my superior senses, I had been completely oblivious to this person's approach. On top of that, it was the same exceedingly beautiful woman from earlier—in other words, the witch. To make matters even worse, she was eating my dinner. I wasn't sure which of these things upset me the most.

"Hey! Stop helpin' yerself to mah soup!"

It became clear, from what I blurted out, that I was most concerned about my soup.

Part 3

Volume 1 — Chapter 1: The Witch and the Fallen Beast

Part 3

As I snatched the pot away from her, the witch made a distressed sound.

“G-Give that back! That’s my dinner!”

“No! This is my dinner! Mine!”

“You knocked over my pot of soup earlier, didn’t you?! Giving me your soup in return is the noble thing to do!”

“There’s nothin’ noble in helpin’ out a witch!”

“Fine then! If you are not going to hand over that soup, then I will have no choice—but to use sorcery!”

I had no response to that threat. *That’s right, my opponent is a witch after all. I shouldn’t be trying to protect my soup, I should be retreating with my sword raised!*

“Listen carefully. If you do not give me that soup right now, I will cause a famine in the north, a plague in the south, a rat infestation in the west, and the death of all wheat crops in the east. The world will be destroyed unless you hand that pot to me this instant!”

What a witch.

But, for some reason, I wasn’t afraid.

I was used to malice, animosity, and bloodlust, and noticed immediately if those feelings were directed toward me. So if I didn’t consciously recognize the danger, I would still unconsciously reach for my blade. Since I wasn’t frightened in the least, I surmised that this witch was all bark and no bite.

I laid aside my worries.

“Do whatever ya want.”

I chose my dinner over the world. As long as nothing happened to me, I couldn’t care less about the world. Just like how if I were to die, nobody would think twice about me. I snatched the ladle out of the flabbergasted witch’s hand, and began to greedily gulp down my soup.

“Waah! Waah! D-Do you even know what you’re saying? Even a demon would take this more seriously! Hey! Don’t drink all of it!”

“Stop buggin’ me. You’re gettin’ really annoying!”

After I shook the witch off my back, she slumped onto the ground. An unnatural silence descended, and I stopped slurping my soup to look at her.

It was strange, how she lay on the ground without moving even a hair.

What if she’s dead? It would be great if she really were dead, but even so, I felt bad for her.

“…Hello?” I timidly called out.

“—I too”

A muffled voice responded. So she *was* still alive. Not only was she alive, but an ominous and unearthly aura emanated from her body.

Did I mess up?

I couldn’t sense any danger, but I was dealing with a witch. I didn’t know what she’d do if I angered her. I shivered and readied myself—

“I want some too…”

I felt the adrenaline drain out of me.

It was more of a pleading voice than one of anger.

What was this? Why did she sound like she was being mistreated? In combination with her raggedy robes, she looked pitiful. Was *I* the bad guy here?

“I’m so hungry… I worked all day to make that soup… I… I was looking forward so much to tasting it… I even woke up at sunrise to start preparing…”

The witch whined and pawed at the ground.

I felt guilty when she said that; I truly was sorry for ruining her hard work.

I was being hunted by a witch at the time, but that still didn’t excuse how I had ruined her dinner. She had even saved me nonetheless. If I didn’t give her a bowl of soup in return, then I would be no better than a mere animal.

“That soup you made was so tasty… I want to have some too…”

It was tasty, you say? I couldn’t deny her any further. I was actually quite proud of having made the soup so quickly.

Clicking my tongue, I filled a bowl with soup and held it toward to the witch. I had lost.

Although her face was obscured by a hood, her expression changed to one of joy as she understood, and she quickly snatched the bowl out of my hands, rapidly slurping the soup straight from the bowl.

“If only you had done this from the beginning instead of putting on airs.”

And she was back to this attitude. This was why I disliked those beings called “beautiful women”. Beautiful witches were even worse.

The witch finished the soup in record time, and even picked out the scraps of dried meat at the bottom of the bowl. She held out the bowl to me with an attitude that made it clear she didn’t expect to be refused, not even a little.

“More.”

How immodest. I furrowed my brow; of course I wasn’t going to give her seconds.

“What the heck are ya here for? What d’ya want from me?”

“I really would like to tell you, but I just don’t have the strength to do so on an empty stomach.”

How could she be so shameless? Yet I knew that even if I glared at her, she wouldn’t be intimidated in the slightest.

I didn’t want to provoke her because I treasured my life. Since the witch didn’t seem to have any intent of attacking and for some reason didn’t carry out her threats, she would have to listen to me. The only issue was that she might take offense to my requests.

“If you answer me, I’ll give you another bowl.”

The witch looked back and forth between the empty bowl and me, then suddenly thrust the bowl toward me, as if to say, *I’ll talk, so hand over the soup.* She then began talking in a dispassionate tone.

“I’m on a journey to find a man named ‘Thirteenth’.”

Thirteenth isn’t a name; it’s a number.

I wanted to interrupt, but I held myself back. After all, the other party was a witch. I couldn’t use common sense when dealing with her.

“Thirteenth was our companion. We studied sorcery together in the forest of the bowed moon, and he had to leave to take care of a problem. We haven’t received any news from him ever since, so we had no choice but to follow his trail of magic and ended up here.”

“The Forest of the Bowed Moon” was located at the very edge of the continent, and was often called “The Forest Without a King”. No country wanted to annex the region because it had a deep connection to witches, so it became an area of nothing. Supposedly, the church had organized witch hunts in that area a countless number of times, but… in a place where witches freely roamed the land, the hunting squads had proved incompetent.

“There are witch hunts in this country, right?”

“There’re witch hunts everywhere.”

The witch’s expression darkened, and she began to rant.

“The hunts are far more aggressive here. Three times I was almost burned at the stake just for walking around.”

I nodded. It was the problem currently faced by the Vanias kingdom. The problem that it was trying to solve by gathering fallen beast mercenaries—the problem of witches.

“There’s a witches’ rebellion goin’ on right now, so ‘course the witch hunts here would be more severe than other places’.”

“A witches’ rebellion?”

Asking for an explanation, the witch blinked.

“Isn’t it the wrong era for that?”

Shouldn’t you support them because you’re a witch too? It seemed to me that this witch was different from the others.

Well, it certainly was the wrong era to be revolting. Large-scale witch rebellions were unheard of outside of folk tales.

“I thought so too, so I didn’t believe the news when I heard it…’till that witch chased me through the woods. It was easy to figure out what was goin’ on after that, ’cause witches didn’t usually attack travelers.”

The way other countries hunted down witches made it seem like they were hunting for survivors.

It was said that, five hundred years ago, there had been a great conflict between the witches and the church. The witches had lost and were forced into hiding. Now they were viewed as evil, and the world sought to eradicate them.

But—it had been five hundred years. They were probably fed up.

Of course, it was right for the church and government to hunt witches who were causing calamities left and right, but it wasn’t right for them to hunt witches who were content to live their lives peacefully. As far as the church was concerned, witch hunts were, from their conception, simply a way to demonstrate its might and authority. If evil didn’t exist, neither would the concept of righteousness. If the concept of righteousness didn’t exist, then no one would believe in God. For this reason, the church decided to make witches symbols of evil.

If a state requested aid from them, the Knights of the Church would mobilize… for an exorbitant “donation”.

Since Vanias didn’t seek the Knights’ aid this time, the Church was simply watching from the sidelines. This situation suited the witches of Vanias, who rioted as they pleased while the kingdom desperately tried to suppress them.

“Actually, ever since I got to Vanias, I’ve been hearin’ lots of rumors ’bout witches runnin’ rampant. Apparently it ain’t rare to see witches takin’ over villages and enslavin’ all the villagers either, but I guess it’s possible that witches like those are just takin’ advantage of the revolution. You pretend like you don’t know what’s goin’ on, but you’re actually here to help the witches, aren’t you?”

The witch trembled and turned pale.

“I wouldn’t want to do something that bothersome! If the rebellion succeeds then the country would need a ruler, right? I don’t want that responsibility. The only country I would consider ruling would be one that is dark, cramped, and full of spiders.”

That kind of country doesn’t exist. I imagined her being swarmed by spiders, and immediately regretted it. My dinner didn’t look so appeti—. Huh? The pot was gone.

I realized that I was no longer holding onto the pot, and immediately turned to look at the witch. Somehow, she had managed to steal it away, and was hurriedly drinking the soup.

“You…when—how’d you do that?!”

“I’m a witch, mercenary. With your guard down just now, I could have easily robbed you of all your fur. Luck won’t save you if you don’t pay attention, just like how this soup is now mine.”

“W-Why you greenhorn, don’t lecture me!”

I uttered a low growl, but the pot was already in her hands, and I had no way of getting it back. Left with no other choice, I licked what was left of the soup off of the bowl I was still holding.

“So? What’s your business here?”

“I’m looking for a book some villains stole from me. That’s what Thirteenth left to find.”

“A book?”

“It’s the only book of its kind. If it were used for evil, some small problems would arise.”

“Like what?”

The witch stopped speaking and stopped eating. She spoke in a soft voice.

Just one remark.

“The end of the world.”

“…What about the world?”

“I said, the end of the world.”

I stifled a yawn.

“That’s amazin’. I’m *so* scared. I feel like I’m gonna cry ’cause I’m so scared right now.”

“Even If you don’t believe me, can you still try to be civil? I feel a bit hurt.”

“I’m not stupid enough to believe that a single book could end the whole world.”

“A single book…? Don’t kid yourself. A single *page* from that book would be more than enough.”

Her voice was as dispassionate as a demon’s, not exaggeratedly fearful; it was as if she were merely stating fact. Thus, her tone exuded a certain degree of realism, so I couldn’t help but suspend my disbelief.

Pragmatically speaking, the world was fine despite the book’s theft. I didn’t know exactly when it had been stolen, but from the way the witch spoke, I could tell that this “Thirteenth” person had been away for a long time.

If this book really could be used to bring about doomsday, then it should have happened by now.

“Well, even if everythin’ you’ve told me so far is true, still, what do I got to do with any of it? I asked you what you wanted from me, but you still haven’t given me a straight answer.”

“What, you really don’t get it yet?”

“Sorry, but I ain’t that smart.”

“Then to sum things up: I have to retrieve a book from some thieves, and it’s currently held in this country somewhere. But I can’t just walk around alone in these parts; I *am* a witch after all. Besides, fleeing gets rather tiring after a while.”

“So, ” the witch looked at me. At last, I realized what she was getting at.

Part 4

Volume 1 — Chapter 1: The Witch and the Fallen Beast

Part 4

“Escort me!”

“Never!” I yelled back.

“You may want to calm down before making a decision.”

“I don’t needa think hard about it. I *hate* witches.”

“Wait, hear me out. We witches offer up sacrifices to demons in order to realize our desires. In fact, forming contracts with demons and paying them sacrifices commensurate in scope with one’s wishes are key concepts in the study of sorcery.”

“I don’t care ’bout your stupid law of equivalent exchange. I’m in this country only to be a witch exterminator, ’cause a world without witches is a world that’s gonna be safer for me. So as you can see, protectin’ you wouldn’t be like me at all.”

“A man who speaks his mind, huh… but why do you despise us so?”

“Can’t you tell from lookin’ at my face?”

“Your face?”

The witch, gazing at my visage, cocked her head.

“It *is* pretty handsome; I can’t say that I dislike it.”

“’S that sarcasm?”

“Not really. You have a magnificent coat, keen eyes, and a robust jaw—all the hallmarks of an apex predator. Furthermore, the human visage hidden beneath your bestial exterior is pleasant-looking as well.”

A human face—beneath my fur? I ran my hands over my face, but it was still that of a beast.

“You can see a human’s face here?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t be able to call myself a witch if I couldn’t. By the way, you’re incorrect in calling yourself a “fallen beast”. Your appearance is actually the result of the returning spell ‘Beastgranting”.

“Re…returning spell?”

“‘Beastgranting’ was an attempt by witches to grant humans the strength of animals. It ended up changing the humans’ bodies into those of beasts. I hear that thousands of years ago, when states did nothing but fight amongst each other, such humans were mass-produced by the millions.”

“You tryin’ to tell me that witches made us fallen beasts?!”

“That’s not entirely correct. Although returning spells are similar to normal spells, the two are actually quite different. Spells are actively cast, while returning spells are the end

results of specific chains of events.”

“You’re not makin’ any sense.”

I frowned. As if she were dealing with a struggling student, the witch began to speak animatedly.

“I shall demonstrate. First, hand me that pebble.”

She pointed to a benign-looking piece of rock next to me. After I handed it to her, she began playing with it in her palm.

“Let this stone represent sorcery. Being a witch, I cast it.”

She threw the pebble with force I had not imagined to be possible from such thin arms. It ricocheted off a tree, somehow went around her, and hit me square in the head.

A solid *crunch* that would not be out of place in a boxing match resounded around the clearing. Thankfully, I was a fallen beast, so I avoided having my head cracked open.

“…Ow.”

The witch turned toward me and shrugged, as if to say “it was an accident”.

“The rock hit the tree, bounced back, missed me, and continued along its path until it hit you. The same principle applies to sorcery.”

“How it bounced off the tree and hit me?”

“Exactly. When the aforementioned beast warriors die, their spirits return to the witch that made them. But, if the witch is dead, then these spirits instead ‘return’ to the witch’s closest relative. The process is analogous to fertilization. So these spirits inhabit women’s wombs, and are reborn as what you would call ‘fallen beasts’.”

“In other words, you’re sayin’ that I had a relative who was a witch, and I was born a fallen beast ’cause she died? No way!”

“Even if it’s not common knowledge, the truth is still the truth. I’m a witch. I don’t kid around about things concerning sorcery.”

Contradicting her claim was the Church’s proclamation that “being born a fallen beast is an indication of evil deeds in past lives.” Accordingly, public knowledge stated that fallen beasts were warlike, had violent tendencies, and spent all their time fighting.

As for me, who would do anything for a peaceful life, I wanted to tell the Church to “stop joking around and get lost,” but most people believed its message. It was extremely disheartening.

“But… havin’ a witch in my family tree…”

“Witches are generally estranged from their families, and live for an extremely long time. When a family forgets that there was once a witch in their family tree, the spell returns.”

The witch let out a sigh, staring melancholically into the now-empty pot.

“—Do you wish to be human again?” the witch asked.

“—*Can* I be human again?” I countered.

The witch smiled.

“I *can* turn you back. Quite easily, in fact. But will you accompany me in return? Make your choice, mercenary.”

My dream was to open a bar somewhere out in the countryside, meet a nice girl, and live a tranquil life.

If this witch was true to her word, then I could claim the normal life I’d long ago given up on. I wouldn’t have to hide my face, live in fear of witches, or scare away harlots anymore. The only question was whether or not I could trust her. She *was* a witch, after all.

“What use could someone as dumb as I am be to a witch?”

“Perhaps I simply want you because you’re fascinating. I’m not a particularly picky witch. I want you more than anyone else, even if you’re not the smartest. Being my escort would require sufficient physical strength.”

“You’re not sayin’ this just to make me let my guard down, are ya?”

“Oh, come on. If I really wanted to kill you, I would have done so a long time ago and without pointless conversation.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. In all my years of dealing with witches, I haven’t seen a single one be so trustworthy. I wouldn’t say that this witch was deserving of trust, but she wasn’t to be immediately discredited either.

I wanted to be able to trust her, but if she was lying…

She *was* a witch, after all.

“…Shall we form a pact?” the witch abruptly suggested.

“A pact?” I asked, confused.

“The witches’ pact, a contract of blood. You agree to be my bodyguard, and I agree to make you a human; then the document is drafted using a mix of our blood. Anyone that breaks the agreement would be unconditionally annihilated.”

“A… annihilated… you…”

I faltered. In contrast, the witch smiled leisurely.

“There’s no need to be afraid. You’ll be fine as long as you abide by the terms of the agreement. Here, hold out your hand.”

She quickly grabbed my hand, giving me no time to object.

Her hand was soft. My heart skipped a beat.

She drew my index finger toward her lips and, without hesitating, put the tip in her mouth. I shuddered as she ran her tongue over my bare skin. It felt as if every hair on my body was standing on end.

“W-Woah!”

A moment later, I winced as the skin on my fingertip was torn open. The witch nodded

with satisfaction as she saw the steady trickle of blood running from my finger, and did the same to her own.

“With this mixture of our blood, I will write a contract in mirror writing. If it is burned, the contract will be annulled. If either of us dies, the contract will be annulled. Otherwise, as long as we clearly recognize abandonment as unacceptable, you and I will be bound by this pact. Unfortunately, I don’t have any paper on me, so I guess cloth will have to suffice.”

The witch tore a piece of cloth off the hem of her robe, which made her appear to be even more ragged than she already was. I watched the crimson blood drip from our fingers, strangely calm.

“Hey… why’re you choosin’ me? If you want to attract less suspicion, why don’tcha choose a less noticeable person to travel with? Bein’ near me’ll only draw more attention to you.”

“Since I wish to go unnoticed, it only makes sense to pick someone that will draw all the suspicion toward himself and away from me.”

The witch answered nonchalantly. *I see.* Whether or not that was true remained to be seen, although between a fallen beast and a witch, the former would definitely attract more attention.

“Also, you smell like the cave I used to live in.”

“The cave you used to live in?”

“That’s right. It was a limestone cave in the forest of the bowed moon, and was quite comfortable despite being dark and damp. I called it my ‘hole in the ground’. That’s a phrase we witches use to refer to our lairs.”

I lightly sniffed my arm, wrinkling my nose. I’d been running through the forest for a long time so I positively reeked of turf, but even so, I smelled strongly of animals.

“…Did ya keep livestock?”

“Livestock…? Oh yes, we had quite a few snakes and spiders.”

What did *spiders* have to do with livestock and snakes? I wanted to find the nearest inn and take a hot bath to rid myself of the thought.

Just then, I started chuckling.

Here I was, in front of a witch, about to form a blood pact and possibly facing annihilation —and I was thinking about taking a bath. It appeared that I had already subconsciously recognized that the witch meant me no harm. I had been foolish to rely on logic alone to judge her. After all, my intuition was the reason that I was still alive today.

I stroked my snout and picked up the rag she was holding.

“Wait! The contract isn’t—“

Before the witch could say “—done yet”, I tore the piece of cloth to shreds and scattered them to the wind.

The witch yelled in protest.

“Aah!! What are you doing?! Do you think writing on a rag using blood as ink is easy?!”

“A contract implies that we don’t trust each other. We don’t need somethin’ like that. Here, gimme your hand for a sec.”

This time, I was the one grabbing *her* hand. It was small and delicate, and blood was dripping from her finger.

I pressed our cut fingertips together, mixing our blood.

The witch looked at me with recognition in her eyes.

“I think I recognize this. Is it a blood oath?” she asked excitedly, pale cheeks flushed. “It’s done like this, right?” laughing, she intertwined our fingers, and firmly pressed her extended thumb against mine.

“It’s better than those formal contracts you witches use. This is more natural for humans—for mercenaries.”

I extricated my hand from her strong grip, the blood on my finger still surprisingly warm. I wondered if mixing fallen beast and witch blood would produce something unexpected. But seeing the witch standing there, thumb covered in blood, I no longer cared.

“I promise, mercenary, that I will not take your head.”

“Oh. ‘kay, thanks. So… what’s your name?”

“My name is Zero.”

Zero is a number, not a name. I considered telling her, but decided not to.

After that, the conversation lapsed into silence. I glanced at her searchingly.

“Aren’t you… gonna ask me my name?”

The witch shrugged drowsily.

“I’m not interested.”

“Huh?”

“The only people I refer to by name are my underlings—my servants. Keep your name private in the company of witches. If you gave me your name, I could immediately turn you into an unquestioning lackey.”

The witch smirked from under her hood. She held out both hands as if to say “in your face”. She looked both childish and grandmotherly at the same time.

“Ultimately, you’re still a witch, eh?”

“Yes. I’m the ultimate witch.”

I chuckled, and the witch laughed in agreement: “It does sound pretty terrifying, doesn’t it?”

And so, our extraordinary relationship began. Neither of us had referred to the other by name, so it was as if we were strangers. However, I guess that was normal for a night-old

fellowship.

It was a good distance to maintain in case our partnership ended prematurely.

END CHAPTER ONE

Chapter 2

Chapter Two — “The Book of Zero”

Fun fact: The text around the summoning circle is the series’ title in Russian

Contents

Part 1

Volume 1 — Chapter 2: “The Book of Zero”

Part 1

Soft. Warm. Fragrant.

I was hugging something, whatever it was. Regardless, it was an unusually pleasant morning.

I opened my eyes lethargically and saw the burnt-out campfire, along with the blackened ground beneath it. I tried to recall what had happened last night, but couldn't remember a thing. *Something about a witch?*

"Zzz…" A noise came from within my embrace. *Oh, the witch.* I thought sleepily.

"Mas…ter…"

"Eh…wha?!"

I was instantly wide awake. Something went "gueh" like a squashed frog as I leapt to my feet. Looking over, I saw the witch, Zero, clad in robes which were nothing more than rags. She had been sent flying by my sudden movement, and was now lying on the ground, still as a corpse. No longer obscured by her hood, which had fallen to the side, her unbearably beautiful face was illuminated by the sunlight.

It seemed that for humans, once one attained a certain degree of beauty, the concepts of age and gender no longer applied. As for Zero, who appeared sexless, she possessed both the innocence of a young girl and the allure of a prostitute. Either way, it unsettled me.

"Wha…what're ya doin'?!"

Zero opened her bleary eyes slightly and began moving about restlessly as if she were looking for something, all with a displeased look on her face.

"Fur…"

"—Eh?"

"So cold…my fur…head…so soft and fluffy…"

"Wake up!" I yelled, striking her on the head.

"Gah!" Zero jumped, startled.

"O… ow! Why did you have to hit me?! I was only sleeping!"

"You've got a problem with everythin', huh? What were you doin' while you were sleepin'?!"

"What…was I doing?"

Zero groggily repeated my question back to me as she gingerly rubbed her head.

"Um…if I'm not mistaken, I was sleeping in your mantle, buried in fur."

"Why're you answerin' me so calmly…? I'm scoldin' you! Say sorry once you've caught on!"

“Don’t start the day off yelling with such an infuriated look on your face; you’re going to scare the animals. What are you so mad about, anyway?”

Yawn, she opened her mouth wide and yawned. Zero narrowed her eyes as if the sunlight was too bright, and cheerfully pulled her hood back on. It hid the upper half of her face from view, and was unfashionable—not to mention suspicious-looking—but I finally felt at ease after she did so. Extreme attractiveness was poisonous to my eyes.

“Were you bothered by my intrusion into your personal space? There’s no helping it, since you have lots of fur, and as you saw, my skin doesn’t protect me very well from the cold. Unless you want me to freeze while you get to sleep snugly all by yourself?”

“But, y’know, I didn’t choose to have a fur coat…”

“It’s not a question of whether you chose to or not. It’s about how you aren’t shivering in the cold. Besides, you didn’t find the experience displeasing, right?”

Her mouth was etched into a thin smile. I thought back to how soft and warm and fragrant she had felt when I had woken up, and my retort caught in my throat. As if she’d read my mind, she nodded with satisfaction.

“It’s cold and lonely to sleep by myself, so since there are two of us here, it only makes sense to sleep together. And above all, you were able to sleep with someone as exquisite as I am. I would say that you should be thankful and not angry.”

“You really just called yourself ‘squisite…”

“The fact still is that you’re resistant to the cold.” She repeated her words from earlier with a triumphant expression.

“Do witches lack modesty or shyness or somethin’…?” I tutted.

“Someone with those qualities couldn’t possibly do a witch’s duties. What, have you fallen for me?” she said in a strange, almost gleeful voice.

“No!” I cut her off immediately.

Probably. No, definitely.

“Ugh, how boring.” The witch really did sound bored.

“So…well, it doesn’t really matter, does it? It’s fine if you likewise think of me as just some inanimate object. You will be my bed, and I will be your hug pillow. That way, we both benefit. I’m glad we’ve reached an agreement.”

“Don’t assume that I agree to this! I—“

“You are my mercenary—right? A mercenary must obey his employer.”

She was right, but the thought of cuddling with a beauty every night made me more tense than overjoyed.

As if to break the silence, Zero’s stomach rumbled.

“…I’m hungry, mercenary.”

I released the tension in my shoulders as I saw how she was gazing at me.

Arguing seemed foolish when my opponent was in a state like this. I did have some birds I caught last night…

“ ‘S roast bird with salt okay with ya?”

Zero just grinned nonchalantly and pestered me to hurry up.

•••••

“I wanted to hunt witches, but somehow wound up escorting one instead…” something like that would probably get laughs at the bar. But of course, there was no way I would go around advertising myself as a witch’s escort. I’d get burnt at the stake right along with Zero.

Preparing to roast the birds, I discussed our plans for today with her. I needed to know where her destination was, as she hadn’t told me yet.

Zero didn’t know any of the place names in Vanias, so I took out my map and had her indicate where she was going.

“Where are we right now?”

Holding the map open, Zero tilted her head to the side. I pointed to a spot on the map. She nodded and said “hm…”, sliding her finger across the map.

Two finger lengths from the spot I was pointing to—there it was. Prasta, the imperial capital.

“Thirteenth is around here. At least, that’s how I feel,” Zero answered blankly. I was perplexed; Prasta was where I was heading. That is to say, it was witch hunt headquarters. The fact that the capital was recruiting fallen beasts because skirmishes with witches went all the way to the kingdom’s heartland meant that there was no way I could lead a witch there without consequences.

“Prasta’s fightin’ some witches right now, so there ain’t no way that a sorcerer’s gonna be there. Ya probably just made a mis—“

“I did not use logic based on common sense to arrive at my conclusion. Instead, you should think of it simply as a reflection of reality. If you trace Thirteenth’s trail of magic, there is no doubt that he is there somewhere. He should be there.” Zero nodded confidently. It seemed like she was hell-bent on going to Prasta.

But what the heck was “Thirteenth” doing in the conflict-ridden heartland?

“It’s gettin’ more and more suspicious, ain’t it? How can ya be so sure that this “Thirteenth” guy ain’t tryna help take over the kingdom?”

“Thirteenth loves to laze around. He knows that taking over a country would only mean more trouble for him.”

“Then what’s he’s doin’ in Vanias?”

“I think I already told you that he is searching for that book. If you think about the kind of knowledge the book contains, it makes sense for him to be searching in places where witches are rebelling.”

“Oh yeah, the book that’s *totally* gonna destroy the world.”

Without realizing it, I had spoken in a mocking manner. Zero didn’t seem angry at all, merely nodding her head, lending my words an eerie sincerity. A chill ran down my spine. I grabbed the branch the salted bird meat was spitted on, and planted it upright in the ground, where it began to sizzle as I roasted it in the open fire. I posed Zero a question, whose eyes sparkled with anticipation as she gazed at the meat.

Part 2

Volume 1 — Chapter 2: “The Book of Zero”

Part 2

“When all’s said ’n done, what kind’a book is it anyway? The book ya say can ‘destroy the world’.”

Zero managed to wrench her gaze away from the browning meat and faced me, breaking into a conceited smile.

“It was written in unfading ink, on parchment perfumed with the finest incense. It was bound with ebony polished to the point that you could see your reflection in it, hinged with gold, and embellished in unsurpassable detail. After an initial glance, anyone would —“

“I ain’t askin’ ‘bout what it looks like! I’m askin’ ‘bout what it says!”

No, the book’s appearance would be useful to know since we were looking for it, but it wasn’t what I wanted to hear about. Zero’s expression turned sour. “It really is a magnificent book,” she muttered in complaint. “I don’t think you would be able to wrap your head around the content even if I explained it…”

“If ya can’t make someone understand even after explainin’, then it was probably a third-rate explanation, eh?”

Zero stared at me silently. Likewise, I silently stared at her. We glared at each other, briefly—

“How much do you know about the study of sorcery?” she suddenly asked. It seemed that I had won the stare-down.

“I dunno ‘bout the specifics an’ such, but… somethin’ about summonin’ demons and doin’ mystical stuff, right?”

“Well, you are correct about that. But do you know by what means?”

“By drawin’ a summoning circle, chantin’ some spell, and performin’ a sacrifice.” I answered without hesitation, and Zero nodded with satisfaction.

“Right again. We then negotiate with the summoned demon to perform supernatural tasks. That is essentially sorcery.”

Even to people unfamiliar with sorcery, this was common knowledge, found everywhere from the church’s preaching to children’s books. This was because witches were playing very active roles as villains in today’s culture.

“Now, those arrows of light that attacked you last night—I called those ‘Staim’. What did you think after seeing them?”

I was a bit confused. Zero laughed when I remained silent.

“There’s no need to overthink it. You were stunned, I assume?”

“Ah, well…hmm…yeah.”

“Humans would be stunned, mercenary, because it was completely unexpected. Because they subconsciously believe that something like that could never happen.”

For sure, the “arrows of light” that the hostile witch had used and the “suddenly appearing earthen box” that Zero had created had both made me revise what I thought I knew about sorcery. I didn’t recall seeing the hostile witch drawing summoning circles while she walked, and neither had I seen her offer up any sacrifices. Naturally, I hadn’t seen any demons either. I had heard rumors that Vanias’ witches had recently started using sorcery of an unknown nature, but what I had seen had proven to be beyond my imagination.

“So my common sense was wrong?”

“It’s the other way around. Your common sense was simply misled. Strictly speaking, ‘Staim’ is not sorcery.”

“It…it ain’t sorcery?”

What the heck it is then? Before I could say a word, Zero answered my thought.

“Yes, it is not sorcery. It is ‘magic’.”

“Ma…jick…? Wha…”

I repeated the unfamiliar word back to her, but silently forming the word over and over with my mouth wasn’t getting me any closer to its meaning. Zero burst out laughing. *Was I making a really weird face just now?*

“What the hell’re ya laughin’ at?!”

“Oh—I was just thinking that, for a supposedly violent and fierce mercenary, you were actually making a pretty cute face just now.”

“C-cute—?! Yer callin’ me…!”

“Don’t be so embarrassed, mercenary; you’re getting cuter by the second. I can barely hold myself back from hugging you.”

To a mercenary like me, being apprehended and called cute was unbelievably insulting.

To soothe my discontent, I sprinkled some crushed dried herbs and salt on the meat, which had begun emitting a mouthwatering smell. The fire crackled and spat yellow sparks as some salt fell in.

“Even though it does not concern you, I will still give you a proper elucidation. After all, it would sully the name ‘the witch of earth and darkness’ to be thought of as ‘third-rate’. But before I discuss the details of magic, I must share some preliminary knowledge with you first. I’m talking about understanding what sorcery is, of course. If you don’t know how sorcery works, then I won’t be able to explain magic to you.”

Zero picked up a tree branch and began engraving strange symbols into the ground. After finishing one glyph, she would move on to the next—until, in front of my eyes, a circle composed of many, many markings was formed.

“—A summoning circle?”

“Correct. A summoning circle is required for the summoning of demons. Witches consider

summoning circles to be sacred ground. They possess the ability to amplify the power of witches' spirits and are essential for witches to protect themselves from any demons they summon."

Zero circumscribed the ring of glyphs with a single circular line. It was so perfectly round that there was no way a human could have drawn it with a tree branch. There were four smaller circles inside the outer circle, evenly spaced away from one another, and crammed with minuscule letters and symbols I could neither read nor understand.

"Protectin' themselves from demons? Do the demons attack 'em or somethin'?"

"Far from attacking; if there is any imperfection in the summoning circle, the demon will *devour* the witch. That is why all witches master the art of drawing summoning circles before anything else. Perfect circles, perfect lines, perfect calligraphy. If you cannot master those techniques, it is impossible to become a witch."

"Ain't that riskin' your life then?"

"Yes…summoning demons is always a risky business." Zero declared, finishing the summoning circle.

Don't tell me she's actually gonna use.… with that, I looked at Zero with terror.

"Wait! No way…you gonna summon a demon?!"

"Exactly. Well, just watch. I feel like you'll find it fairly interesting."

Ignoring my pleas for her to stop, Zero held out her hands toward the summoning circle and began to mutter, chanting out a spell. I wanted to stop her, but at the same time I was afraid of messing up the sorcery somehow and causing something bad to happen. I half-rose to my feet, ready to escape at a moment's notice. However, I couldn't muster up the nerve to run, so I stayed, trembling with fear, glancing between Zero and the summoning circle.

—Around five minutes passed. Zero still stood there, chanting the same spell.

By that point, I'd gotten tired of being vigilant. *Is anythin' gonna happen at this rate?* The moment those thoughts materialized in my head, the summoning circle began to glow. It was a pale, blue light. Something appeared on the other side.

—*Shit, it's here. What the hell is it…?!* I leapt away from the circle with all my might.

A second later the light vanished, and I stared at the thing that Zero had summoned.

Its body was similar to that of a human's, but it was definitely inhuman. It had deep emerald-colored eyes without any whites in them, and insect-like wings sprouting from its back. And—it was surprisingly small.

It's smaller 'n the palm of my hand, this thing.

"That's…a demon?"

"Yes, it is a demon. But…aren't you a bit too scared of it?"

"Shaddap! There ain't a human alive that's not scared of demons, 'sides witches!"

I was standing as far away as possible, so on edge that the hair on my tail was standing on

end. Zero looked astonished at my reaction.

“Come take a closer look, it’s perfectly safe. He won’t bite. In fact, this is technically a sprite, even though it is called a demon.”

“Fine, so there might be some difference between sprites ’n demons, but—“

“There is no difference. Essentially, they are the same thing. What they are called depends on the time period and geographic location, but we witches refer to any inhuman creature by the generic term ‘demon’. This includes sprites, spirits—and gods, of course.”

I was shocked.

“Ain’t it wrong to lump gods in with demons?”

“The Church makes no distinction between pagan gods and demons. In other words, even the Church admits that the public’s perception of their God as being different from demons is simply a misconception caused by their faith.”

I calmly accepted that revelation. I didn’t worship any deity anyway, so her explanation was much more believable to me than there being only one true God.

I edged toward the summoning circle and gazed at the tiny and clearly unnerved demon. It went *bzzt bzzt* like a buzzing insect.

“…Is this guy scared?”

“Seems so. Low-ranking demons like this one are almost never summoned, so he’s probably not used to it.”

“So demons have ranks ’n such?”

“They do. There is a strict hierarchy in the world of demons. The higher-ranking ones possess great power, and have numerous lower-ranking ones as slaves. Thus, if you manage to summon a high-ranking demon, you can learn the summoning procedures for many lower-ranked demons from them. Thus the study of sorcery has flourished and grown like the branch of a giant tree.”

Part 3

Volume 1 — Chapter 2: “The Book of Zero”

Part 3

“So, what rank’s this ‘un?”

“It’s exceedingly close to being the weakest. So weak that you could probably crush it with your hand.”

It looked like I had been scared for nothing. Still, it was shocking to discover that there were demons weaker than I was.

“O tiny demon—please grant my request.”

The demon stared at the branch Zero held out, took a deep breath—and exhaled fire.

Having ignited the branch, the demon looked at Zero inquiringly.

“Right. Now for my side of the bargain. Thank you for the hard work.”

Nodding her head in satisfaction, Zero reached into the pouch at her waist and pulled out a small nut. She cracked it open and put the kernel in the demon’s mouth. It shook its shoulders and disappeared.

I went from staring at a demon to staring at empty space, letting out a breath of astonishment.

“That’s amazin’…it’s the first time I’d seen a demon ’n sorcery with m’own two eyes.”

“Was how I drew the summoning circle, recited the spell, summoned the demon, and bargained roughly how you thought it would be like?”

Zero blew out the flame on the tip of her tree branch. It had been exactly as I had imagined. Disregarding the demon’s benign appearance, the process had been exactly as described in public knowledge.

“—Now, time for me to address the aforementioned book. The grimoire contains instructions on how to perform sorcery by simply speaking the appropriate spell. It is split into four sections called ‘books’: the book of Hunting, the book of Capturing, the book of Harvesting, and the book of Safeguarding.”

While speaking, she waved her finger once. A small flame flickered on her fingertip.

My eyes went wide open, and I stepped back to distance myself.

“This is the power of the demon you saw just now: to start a small fire. I neither drew a summoning circle nor summoned anything, yet the result is the same. This is magic. In the past, I would have had to recite ‘Karlo, rai… fire, lodge here… the Book of Hunting, verse one: «Leks»… Sanction this! I declareth myself to be Zero,’ but no more.”

“Y…you can even skip the spell?”

“If you have enough experience and proficiency, yes. Now, spells are composed of three distinct elements. In the spell I recited just now, the phrase “karlo, rai” is meant to spur the demon to action. The phrase “fire, lodge here” is a clear declaration of intent meant to

guide oneself, and bringing the recitation to a close with the spell's name and one's own name is analogous to a battle cry."

Battle cry…? Reading my thoughts, Zero nodded with vigor.

"Enunciating one's own name along with the spell's name is very helpful while practicing magic. As one gains experience, the need for this aid diminishes. After enough practice, one can simply chant the spell silently—almost like a prayer, if you will. It's pretty convenient, right? You can start a fire without having to keep a piece of flint handy."

It did seem really useful. My hands were larger than a normal human's hands by far, so although I could start fires with flint fit for human hands, it was tough and frustrating. Zero blew out the flickering fire on her fingertip as I sighed with envy. I finally began to grasp what Zero had meant when she had said my common knowledge was not wrong, but simply misguided. Still…

"How're ya borrowin' the power of a demon that ain't even been summoned if ya really do need'a summon it first?

"No, that's not it. It's just that…no one had ever tried to borrow a demon's power without summoning it first."

No one had ever tried…? That meant—

"That's…stupid, ain't it?! Then…what was the point o' summonin' demons in the first place? Were ya wastin' time on purpose?"

"Exactly. No one tried to stop the practice, so we just continued to summon demons, trying to minimize the risk they posed to the world. That was sorcery. It was not that we lacked the means to perform sorcery without summoning demons. It was more of a self-inflicted inconvenience."

—They had blundered right at the beginning.

And sorcery had developed with this mistake at its roots. For god knows how many centuries, this mistake had gone unnoticed. I was speechless. Facing me, Zero continued.

"The founding principle of magic is written in that stolen book; namely, the fact that sorcery does not require the summoning of demons. It also includes documentation on countless demons' names and powers, along with spells and the sacrifices required by each one. The tasks a demon can perform are set in stone, and there is no room for negotiation. There are even demons for doing things like pouring salt into fire to cause yellow sparks."

Zero paused.

"I call this the Demon Contracts Principle—magic. (1)"

At last, I managed to grasp the meaning of the word "magic".

Magic was a new technique that got rid of the most labor-intensive part of sorcery, the summoning of demons, and made sorcery quick and easy to perform.

It could be thought of as the difference between summoning the king into your own room to hear your request, and simply writing your request in a letter to the king. No matter how you thought of it, the latter was obviously the simpler way, but witches used the former

method and studied it tenaciously.

—But, what if one book were to correct this error?

It took thousands of soldiers to take down one witch, yet just one witch to slaughter thousands of soldiers. But, the Church—the world would be able to overpower the witches, because sorcery was both labor and time intensive. In the middle of their ceremonies, witches were defenseless and easy to kill. Few witches possessed the ability to command powerful sorcery, so the death of even one of them could be called a victory.

But if knowledge of magic, a simpler and faster version of sorcery, spread across the globe…

“Seems like that sure ain’t somethin’ ta laugh at.”

There had been great technological revolutions in the past. The discovery of iron revolutionized warfare. The invention of the wheel and subsequently the horse-drawn cart revolutionized commerce. How was the discovery of magic going to change the world…?

First, witches would probably become stronger. If there were more witches like Zero and the witch from the woods yesterday, then there would be a high likelihood that a second war would erupt between the Church and the witches. Actually, there wouldn’t just be a *likelihood* of war—there *would* be war.

That was exactly what was going on in Vanias right now. Witches, having hidden themselves away for five hundred years, had started a revolt. Zero’s missing book had to have something to do with this state of affairs.

“So, that witch from last night used the magic from yer book?”

Zero dropped her shoulders in agreement as I summarized the situation.

“Was she the one who stole it?”

“No, she was still a novice. I tried to ask her about the book’s whereabouts, but gave up because she was in too much of a fury to converse with. Either way, it seemed that someone had taught her what she knew.”

“Someone had taught her… ah…”

Once read, one book’s knowledge would become the knowledge of millions.

The same thing must have happened to Zero’s book. The remaining question was whether or not only witches had knowledge about magic. From what I had heard so far, it was sufficient to simply recite a spell and provide the appropriate sacrifice to use magic…

“What you’re suggestin’ is that…anyone can use magic?”

“No…that’s not it. There is no gray area between those who can and those who cannot. You will be able to practice magic if you have the talent for it, but if you do not, then you will not be able to practice magic no matter how hard you try. Knowledge can only take you so far.”

“This *talent* o’ yours…how d’ya see if someone has it or not?”

“It’s simple. They simply need to try reciting a beginner-level spell. If the spell shows

signs of activation, then they have the talent, and if not, then they do not. If they have the talent, then it takes at most five years to learn the craft."

I see—there's no way for this to be worse. Magic was terrifyingly powerful, and those with talent would need a mere five years to learn to use it. There were almost certainly people who would abuse this power for evil.

I realized why Zero was so anxious.

The world really might fall into ruin.

Far from the whole book, a single page would do. It was just as Zero had said.

I thought back to the tree trunk-piercing arrows of light from last night. Normally, to create that kind lethality with a bow, you would need a huge bow, iron-shafted arrows, and a monster of a strongman to draw and release the weapon. On the battlefield, a man like that would be plenty threatening. A *group* of people who could use magic like "Staim" would undoubtedly be able to force an enemy army to retreat with their tails between their legs.

If the group had proper leadership and behaved with army-like discipline, everything could still be fine. But what if the group of magic users devolved into a looting mob? What if some shady bastard discovered that he had a talent for magic? Who would be able to stop them?

If knowledge about magic were to spread, all sorts of power balances would be broken, and that would mark the beginning of chaos and conflict.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. "Demon Contracts Principle" in Japanese is "akuma no keiyaku housoku" (悪魔の契約法則), and "magic" in Japanese is "mahou" (魔法). The relationship between the two is that the "ma" (魔) in "mahou" is taken from the "ma" (魔) in "akuma" (demon), and that the "hou" (法) in "mahou" is from the "hou" (法) in "housoku" (law). Thus "mahou" (魔法) is an amalgam of the two and can be roughly interpreted as "Demons' Law". The term "magic" will continue to be used in the translation.

Part 4

Volume 1 — Chapter 2: “The Book of Zero”

Part 4

“That book’s a real pain in the ass. Why’s somethin’ like that…”

“It’s because…”

Zero shut her mouth, and nearly simultaneously, I shot to my feet.

Bloodlust—just now, from somewhere close by. Before I could look for the threat, I heard a strange sound and turned to face the direction from which it came. Zero seemed to notice it as well, and shifted her gaze to the woods.

That’s it—the woods. Something ridiculously large was ripping through the foliage nearby, heading straight for us.

“…No way. This ain’t a joke!”

Mowing down the trees in its path, the whatever-it-was flew out of the forest with a deafening roar and all the force of a cannonball.

The moment I saw it, the text of a marker from the map of Vanias floated to the front of my mind.

—Warning! Wild Ebru boars live in the woods.

It was an enormous boar. But even that was an understatement. This was—

“Hell, this thing’s way too big! It’s huge even compared to me!”

How could you not yell when something like this was coming to crush you? The Ebru boar possessed a towering body, no exaggeration whatsoever. As it met my easily two-meter high gaze, I couldn’t even laugh. Its ruined left eye and countless scars indicated that it was a veteran fighter who had repelled countless hunters.

Its remaining right eye was bloodshot, and drool dribbled from its mouth as it focused on me. Even now, it was ready to charge. Two razor-sharp tusks sprouted from either end of its mouth. Even a fallen beast like myself, if impaled by one of these, would be torn in two at the waist.

Fallen beasts were naturally disliked by animals. I had never had a problem with that characteristic before today.

Should I run? No, there’s no point. Considering the speed with which it had mowed through the woods, even if I reached the forest, there was no way I’d be able to escape. Carrying Zero, it would be even more impossible. Besides fighting, there were no other options.

I leapt to the side as it charged, planning to flank its head. If I could put out its other eye, I’d instantly have the upper hand—the battle already looked to be in my favor. I pulled out my sword. The sunlight glinted off of the sword blade and robbed the Ebru boar of its vision, forcing it to make a blind charge toward me. I prepared to dodge to the side, but stopped after, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Zero standing flat-footed behind me.

This idiot, why—

“Ya idiot! What’re ya standin’ there for?!”

I twisted my torso, drew Zero toward me, and dropped to the ground. The boar’s cold tusks grazed by my back. I immediately jumped up and readied myself to get Zero to safety, but for some reason, she got up in front of me—directly between myself and the Ebru boar.

“Hm…how timely. I will be able to show you the “appearance” of magic in a real battle. I won’t omit the chant this time.”

“Watch.” Zero said, gracefully raising her arms over her head. The boar, its charge having missed its target, was preparing to charge again. At the same moment as it kicked forward, Zero shouted.

“Meaza, li, kib…writhing vines, capture this boar and bind him! The Book of Hunting, verse eight: «Kabrata»! I declareth myself to be Zero!”

—I couldn’t understand what happened.

Before my eyes, countless vines flew out of the ground and wrapped themselves around the boar’s hooves, sending it toppling to the ground. The creepers continued to wrap themselves around the boar until it could no longer move an inch. It took only a few seconds at most for Zero to complete the spell. There was no doubt that this was some kind of inhuman power.

This was—magic. If Zero could perform feats like this, then it didn’t seem like she had a use for me. The reason for my existence as a mercenary was in grave danger.

“By the way, mercenary…”

While I was staring blankly at the boar, who was on its back and looking comical as it waved its feet, Zero suddenly turned to face me.

“Is it edible? Delicious?”

“Uh huh,” I said impassively. I wasn’t actually sure. It was just that I couldn’t muster up the will to say anything else.

“Oh, so we can eat it?” Zero asked with a glowing expression. I rubbed my eyes, and proceeded to dampen Zero’s high spirits.

“No…I mean, sure, it could be tasty, but…huntin’ is forbidden. Let it go.”

Hopes dashed, Zero slumped her shoulders and plodded toward the boar.

She lightly flicked her finger in front of the enraged boar, who had been frothing at the mouth. Instantly, the boar was dazed and stared blankly back at Zero.

“You’re lucky you aren’t going to be eaten after attacking me, you hunk of meat. Be thankful, and don’t show yourself to me again.”

As Zero chastised the boar, the vines restraining it smoothly slithered back into the ground. Freed, the boar trotted back into the woods, with Zero watching it hungrily. “Well then.” She turned her gaze toward the sky. Simultaneously, I saw something behind the

trees by chance.

“—There!”

I spoke sharply, and Zero made a movement as if she were stringing a bow. It was “Staim”. Three shafts of light appeared in Zero’s hand and bore through the air, heading for one tree. All three arrows lanced through the bark, and a shill scream rang out.

Alright. One way or another, I’d gotten used to seeing magic. Or rather, my sense of fear was partially subdued. If I got scared every time I saw magic, my body wouldn’t be able to take it. Seeing the figure that tumbled out from behind the tree, I shivered from head to toe and delivered a low growl. I had seen that gaudy blond hair before…

“Ya bastard…yer the witch that was chasin’ me yesterday, eh?”

“Mercenary, wait!”

I unsheathed my sword. It was a good opening to strike, as my opponent was off-balance. Nevertheless, Zero abruptly reined me in.

“That is a child.”

“A child—“

I reserved my judgement and scowled down at the groveling blond. It was true that it was small, and one could say it looked like an innocent child. This was the person I’d run away from that frantically yesterday?

My thoughts quickly filled with pity. I gently sheathed my sword, and Zero motioned for me to stay where I was as she approached the small witch with great strides.

“You’re a feisty one, eh? Were you the one that set that boar after us?”

“Why—why did you have to interfere?! You’re a witch!”

The groveling witch didn’t answer the question, but gave a sharp yell and glared at Zero.

“Do you know how valuable the heads of fallen beasts are to witches? I *needed* that head, so why did you interfere?!”

“Because this is my mercenary. I’d be troubled if he were to die.”

“I set my eyes on him first…! You snatched him away from me!”

I was startled.

Did he just say “I” (1)? That witch just now. I thought that all magic users had to be female because they were called “witches” , but apparently this young boy was a witch as well. *Now that I think about it, wasn’t Thirteenth a guy too? Does that mean there’s no relationship between gender and magical ability?*

“It doesn’t matter who set whose eyes on him first. What matters is who possesses him at this time. I wouldn’t give a tyke like you a single hair from his tail. And even if I gave you a hair, I wouldn’t give you his head.”

“What—?!”

“To a pseudo-witch like you who can’t handle a single ‘staim’, it would be an item far

exceeding your aptitude. You should give up. With your strength, never mind me, you probably couldn't even kill my mercenary."

These people talked about people's heads as if they were mere trade goods. I was annoyed, but it did not feel right for me to butt in, so I stayed silent. I valued my life over my pride.

"That's why…"

The young boy gripped the dirt.

"That's why I need his head!"

The boy got up, yelling.

"No matter what it takes, I must get stronger!!"

He pulled out something from the bag at his waist, crushed it with his hands, and scattered it around him. Moments later, his clothes and hair began dancing as if caught by the wind, and the air vibrated with a strange, high-pitched noise.

"Bug, do, gu, raat—gather, world-destroying conflagration (2); burst and burn!"

It was a spell. He was trying to use magic. If I didn't kill him first, he would kill me. I gripped the handle of my sword.

"Ho. He's going to use «Flagis»? —Interesting."

Zero's muttering brought my movement to a halt. The slight squinting and that smirk—it was how she had acted yesterday. I froze at the sight of her. The boy, meanwhile, spread his arms as if he were dancing, embracing the air. Fire in the shape of a snake coiled around his body, gathering between his hands.

"The Book of Hunting, verse six: «Flagis»! Sanction this; my name is Albus!"

The boy cried out. Zero drew in a small breath.

" «Rejection». Sanction this—I declareth myself to be Zero."

Everything went silent, but that in itself spoke volumes. The flames, which had seemed like they were going to explode, dissipated in that moment, and the youth stared at his faltering hands with a look of confusion.

"How…why?! Why, why, why…?! The spell was taking effect!"

The boy shouted as if he were on the brink of bursting into tears. His shoulders quaked as Zero approached.

"Uh…"

"Don't underestimate me, brat. That is mine. My magic. My sagacity, my power. To attempt to wield it against me is absurd.

"What-that's…what are you…"

"The technique of using the power of words and sacrifices to harness the power of demons without summoning them—last night, you made a big fuss about how you learned it from "the Book of Zero", did you not? *I* am that Zero. *I wrote that book."*

As if pressured by Zero's silence, the boy backed up a step. He sat down listlessly,

dumbstruck.

—Wait a second.

Zero wrote that book? The book that's gonna destroy the world?

"…Mercenary."

"Ah! Uh, oh, me? What?"

Just as taken aback as the boy, I literally jumped at being addressed so abruptly.

"I would like to hear an explanation from this youngster. What do you think?"

"'What do I think…why're ya—"

"askin' me?" I was about to say, but was bewildered. I hated witches, and this kid had tried to take my life. We were going to hear from him, so Zero wanted to take my wishes into consideration.

If she had ignored me and continued on her own, I could have grumbled unhappily, but since she was paying heed to my opinion, I couldn't just bluntly refuse her. I roughly scratched the back of my head, and grunted out a short "do as ya like."

"…Just don't give 'im any roast bird."

"Sure. I feel the same way."

Kuku, Zero laughed. The boy's stomach gave a great rumble in concert.

I exchanged glances with Zero and gazed at the boy's crimson face.

"…We're not givin' ya any?"

A few minutes later, Zero and the boy were stuffing their faces with the browned bird. Needless to say, I was forced to look on with an empty stomach.

END CHAPTER TWO

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The blond magic user used the (generally) male first person pronoun “boku”.
2. In Buddhism, the cataclysmic inferno signaling the end of the world.
3.

Chapter 3

Chapter Three — The Coven of Zero

三章　ゼロの魔術師団

Contents

Part 1

Part 1

Volume 1 — Chapter 3: The Coven of Zero

Part 1

“I was taught how to use magic by the ‘Coven of Zero’.”

The boy named Albus spoke while stuffing his face with roast bird.

Actually, “named” wasn’t really the right term to use here, as he seemed to be using an alias. I didn’t really get why he was operating under a false name, but I would probably just get lectured by Zero and Albus both about how one’s real name was extremely important in sorcery and to conceal it as such if I asked.

“The ‘Coven of Zero’… sounds kinda like a guild or a mercenaries’ association.”

“It might have the same meaning as a guild in that it’s a union for a profession. Learning magic is compulsory for every member belonging to the coven. There are those who agree to do so willingly, and there are those who get punished.”

Albus pulled down his collar to reveal a choker inset with a gleaming red gemstone.

Being a greedy mercenary, I couldn’t help but think: *that sure looks valuable.*

“This is proof of membership in the ‘Coven of Zero’. Everyone receives one at the entrance ceremony. It’s meant to be a symbol of loyalty to ‘that person’. Every member of the coven takes a witches’ blood oath swearing faithfulness to them.”

“Who’s ‘that person’?”

“The person who, ten years ago in Vanias, founded the ‘Coven of Zero’. We don’t know what they look like or what their name is, so everyone just refers to them as ‘that person’.
“

In other words, the same person who stole ‘The Book of Zero’ from the ‘Forest of the Bowed Moon’ ten years ago came to Vanias and founded the ‘Coven of Zero’. Although I didn’t know for sure what their objective had been, considering that the witches of Vanias were revolting at the moment, it wasn’t particularly difficult to see what their goal may have been.

“‘That person’ possessed integrity in addition to a lordly air, and did not discriminate between people. It doesn’t matter if you’re a witch or just a normal human. As long as you have the required talent, they will teach you how to perform magic. Because of this, magic spread like wildfire through this country. There are actually a lot of homeless and orphans in the coven too.”

“So,” Albus transitioned, “going back to the “Book of Zero’; that’s the sacred text of the ‘Coven of Zero’. It has been for ten years. That’s why I would know so much about the book ‘that person’ wrote…”

Albus turned his gaze to Zero, who shrugged lightly.

“It has binding of ebony and hinges of gold, yes? Then there is no question that it was I who wrote that book.”

Zero's response was smooth… For whatever reason, it seemed like she wasn't going to tell Albus that it had been stolen. That was probably a smart choice. If she had gone and said that the book which they were treating as a sacred text had been stolen property, anyone would have resisted that claim. Right now, Albus looked caught between trusting Zero and condemning her. He seemed to be realizing that her competency in magic was leagues above his.

"—Do you find it hard to believe?"

Looking down, Albus slowly shook his head.

"I don't know…but you used magic…what if you really are…"

Albus immediately turned his eyes toward Zero.

"You're one of us…aren't you?"

Zero gave a small smile to the bashful Albus. She gave neither an affirmation nor a denial. Albus, taking her silence as agreement, nodded in contentment.

"So? Why is this 'Coven of Zero' inciting rebellion against the kingdom?"

"…It's because we couldn't take it anymore."

All of a sudden, it was as if a shadow was cast over Albus' expression. It was like night and day compared to his liveliness when talking about the coven and 'that person' just moments before. A horribly chilly feeling emanated from him.

"Since the olden days, there have been many witches living in Vanias. They made medicines, performed divinations, and had working relationships with the villagers. In exchange for their medicines and divinations, they received bread and sweet pastries from the villagers."

He was talking about the so-called ideal state of coexistence between witches and humans. I'd heard about the miracle medicines of the witches and the divinations for finding lost items. Witches like these were called 'white witches', and I'd even heard tales of villagers protecting them from witch hunts.

"From the start, the witches of this country didn't know any sorcery besides those for performing benign tasks like these. But in the end, humans couldn't see witches as anything but very embodiments of evil, blamed every misfortune on them, and hunted them down. We couldn't stand a society like that anymore. They took every opportunity there was to kill us, even though we had done nothing wrong! That's the reason why the 'Coven of Zero' was established!"

Albus explained all this bitterly. Those gold-colored eyes of his were dyed clearly with anger and resentment. They seemed to be saying that he had trusted humans, but that they had betrayed him in return.

"Ya witches ain't as innocent as ya say you are. The reason why witch hunts began was 'cause witches spread plague all over the place. Ya heard about it, right? When they burned one of those witches at the stake, a crazed group of 'em would burn a whole village down to the ground for revenge."

I'd heard that an event, called the 'Revels of Revenge', was the reason why this country

had started hunting down witches. If that was the case, then these witch hunts were simply the witches reaping what they had sown. The witches spread plague and took revenge when one of their own was killed for it, so it wasn't any surprise that large-scale witch hunts began to take place.

Of course, Albus flared up at me for the implication in my words.

"—Plague? Where's the proof that witches infected people with plague?"

"I don't care. I only heard it as a rumor. But there must've been proof somewhere for them to have started burnin' witches."

"Since you don't know anything—don't speak irresponsibly, fool! There isn't any proof. The only 'proof' they have is that there was a witch living near the village from which the plague spread! But they, with their scant evidence, captured that lone witch and burnt them to death! For bastards like those, only burning down their village would do!"

"Burning down their village…eh?"

Part 2

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Part 2

I let a look of scorn creep onto my face as Albus spoke angrily.

“In other words…you guys did it, di’n’tcha? I dunno if ya witches did it outta revenge‘r what, but ya brought the witch hunts on yerselves when ya massacred the people livin’ in that village.”

“That’s…! But…then, did you want us to take the murder of one of our own lying down?”

“That’s not what I meant. But ta burn down a village just fer killin’ one witch? A village for a witch…I see how it is. That’s an equivalent exchange, for sure.”

I sneered as Albus, clearly shivering, let his golden eyes quiver in their sockets.

“That’s…nevertheless…!”

“Listen here, sonny. Were the dead villagers or their babies involved with the witch hunts? Was anyone who lived in that village a target for revenge? What about the innocent villagers? What about the villagers that just happened to be there? Or, didja pick ’n choose who to kill? I didn’t think so.”

“That’s…!”

“If it was okay for ya to slaughter the people who lived in that village without distinction, then it’s okay for them ta kill you witches without distinction too. In the end, it’s just them takin’ revenge for yer revenge, so in other words it’s a just war. Against the witches, that is. I don’t care whether the humans or the witches started the conflict…but that’s what turned the skirmishes into war was the ‘Revels of Revenge’. You witches started this fight. There’s no changin’ that reality.”

Albus pursed his lips and glared at me with hatred. Did I go too far? The sorcerer was but a kid after all.

“Still…Soulena tried to save the village…!”

Trying to stem the frantic flow of built-up tears from his eyes, Albus managed to squeeze out a sentence.

“Soulena?”

Albus scowled doggedly as I repeated the name back to him.

He seemed more hurt than angry.

“The great Soulena…she was the witch who was killed. The witch who became the cause of the ‘Revels of Revenge’.”

“Ah…”

“She was the finest witch in the kingdom. The eldest and the gentlest—she was truly a great witch! There wasn’t a disease she couldn’t cure, so every single one of Vanias’ renowned witches received lessons from her. She saved so many people’s lives!”

I see. So she had been the witches' kingpin. As I came to such an understanding—

"She was known as 'a witch of the chanting moon'." Zero supplemented.

"A witch…of the chanting moon?"

"Witches are divided into different factions with varying approaches toward sorcery. Other than that though, we all still deal in the same currency, and have artisans and blacksmiths all the same."

"Ah…well, okay."

It was just like how we mercenaries had different tastes in weapons and battlefields. Even though we were speaking of witches and sorcery, there was nothing out of the ordinary about such trivial divides.

"The witches of the chanting moon are a faction which often come into contact with humans and pay heed to their requests. For that very reason, their faction excels at inventing new ways to apply sorcery to a variety of situations and produces many revolutionary practices. These include incense for warding off bad dreams, and stones for rainmaking. So, being the birthplace of the chanting moon faction, Vanias is home to many widely renowned witches. The great Soulena was like their patron—I would have liked to meet her."

"Yeah." Albus nodded proudly.

"Soulena was a kind witch. A year ago, she visited a village plagued by disease and used sorcery to try and save them. Even so, she was accused of spreading the infection—and killed! Isn't that unfair?!"

"You can say what ya want, but talk is cheap. Who knows if she did or didn't do it?"

Hearing this, Albus' eyes filled with bloodlust.

"How dare you insult—!"

"Calm down, youngster. The mercenary meant no insult. This is simply how the world sees it. The world lives in fear of witches. Killing him out of rage will only serve to promote that fear and cast the rest of us as evil."

"But—!"

Forming an objection, Albus pursed his lips. He seemed to understand that there was no way to convince me otherwise.

Sorry, but I loathe witches by nature. I don't feel like agreein' with a witch.

However, I did manage to grasp the big picture of the conflict. Humans had killed the Vanian witches' representative, which caused the bottled-up rage of the witches, who had endured witch hunts to that day, to erupt. This then caused the "Revels of Revenge", which only made the people more fearful toward witches, and in response to the wide-scale witch hunts resulting from that fear, the Coven of Zero rebelled, and warfare against the state began.

"'That person' is fighting to bring peace to us witches…to purge this country of witch hunts! That's why even Soulena's granddaughter joined the Coven of Zero."

“…Witches can have grandchildren?”

“Yeah, of course.” Albus gazed at me contemptuously. It seemed that he thoroughly disliked me.

“Witches are human too, so we do have kids and grandkids. So, since ‘that person’ didn’t reveal themselves, she, a direct descendant from Soulena, was entrusted to lead the Coven of Zero. She can’t consult with ‘that person’ so she doesn’t give orders per se, but it’s important to have a leader people can look up to.”

I see—so she was a figurehead. Even so, the dead Soulena’s granddaughter was probably enough to unite the coven as a just cause worth fighting for.

“She’s absolutely beautiful! She’s clever too, and brave. She’s just like Soulena!”

From his sullen mood, Albus made a complete turnaround as he, eyes gleaming, rambled on about the charms of the “symbol of revenge” that he served. In complete adoration, Albus looked as if he had an itch along his spine. This guy wasn’t fighting out of loyalty to ‘that person’—he had ulterior motives toward a certain woman all along!

Part 3

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Part 3

“She’s a quick learner, slender and tall…her rack is huge too!”

I see. I suddenly wanted to meet her too… not for any particular reason, of course.

“After Soulena’s death, everyone realized that there was no way witches and normal humans were gonna get along without fighting. It was time to stand up for ourselves. People said that if we didn’t show our strength, then we’d just keep getting hunted down for sport.”

“Eh, sure.”

From what I’d heard, up until the “Revels of Revenge” a year ago, there were practically no witch hunts at all. Humans had just disinterestedly continued their coexistence with the witches. But disinterested was disinterested. Though humans relied on witches, they came to the silent agreement that getting involved with them was a bad idea and blamed witches for anything and everything bad.

So humans weren’t really treating the witches as they should have. Lots of humans believed that by killing them, it would solve the problems they blamed them for. This belief, too, was internalized.

Is it really surprising that witches would be unhappy with that kind of coexistence?

And so, ten years ago, Vanias’ witches gained the power of magic from the Book of Zero. It took five years to learn to use, so ten years was long enough for it to proliferate throughout the nation.

The embers of conflict had been lit, and now they had means to their motive. If, in such a situation, hostilities broke out, there would be no return to dispassionate and peaceful coexistence.

“That’s why I decided to fight to protect the serenity of our way of life. But war with the kingdom’s already begun, and I need to do something, or else everyone’ll be slaughtered. But I’m still weak…”

“And that is why you desire the head of a fallen beast?” Zero murmured.

Albus let out an embarrassed chuckle.

That ain’t a laughin’ matter. You were gonna bring a bloody end to my life!

“Yep. The head of a fallen beast is the best sacrifice there is, right? If I had that as an offering, I should be able to perform all sorts of high-level magic. You cast ‘Staim’ without saying the spell earlier, right? I hadn’t even imagined that someone could nullify my magic on top of that. You’re amazing!”

Shooting a look of envy at Zero, Albus sighed.

He was acting just like a dreaming, power-hungry kid.

“My affinity for magic isn’t bad, though. I did learn how to use it pretty fast. It’s just that

my magical power is kinda low… Even when I follow the Book of Zero's instructions for higher-level magics to the letter, I still can't get them to work…"

"Ain't it the book that's wrong then?"

What I said was pretty harsh, but Zero didn't seem bothered.

"Everything is as it should be. There are certain mechanisms implemented into the book as safety measures. They prevent greenhorns with low magical capacity from performing high-level magic."

"So what's magical capacity?"

"Well, to put it into words, it would be physical strength. Strength will allow you to perform even magic you are unversed in. And so there have been incidents where witches have performed magic beyond their means with quality offerings and had their magic run out of control."

"With my head, huh?"

"Yes. With your head. My 'Rejection' is also one of the safety measures I created in anticipation of such events. It operates by calling on the power of a high-ranking demon in order to cancel out the magic of a lower-ranking one."

Just as I was digesting that information, Albus turned toward me, eyes gleaming.

"So what you're saying is that I'm still weak, but with an amazing offering like a fallen beast's head, I could use powerful magic when I really need to? If those witch-hunting guys ever come, I could protect everyone! So please! Give me that head!"

"Stop jokin' around or I'll kill ya, stupid kid."

I punched him with my fist.

"Gyah!" cried Albus, tearfully wrapping his arms around his head.

"Aren't ya fifteen or somethin'? Shouldn't ya be worryin' about protectin' yer family first before talkin' about savin' anythin' else? Aren't yer parents worried 'boutcha?"

"That's got nothing to do with you. When there's a need to fight, kids'll help too."

"Oh, is that right? You're a stubborn one, aren't ya? So…what now, Mr. Witch?"

Are you gonna take the book back? was what I was really implying.

But just as Zero had foretold, things weren't going to be that simple.

"—Where is the 'Book of Zero' now, youngster?"

"Well…of course it's at the academy…"

"Academy?" I asked.

"Hideout." Albus curtly corrected himself. It seemed to mean the same thing as Zero's "hole in the ground".

"May I ask you to guide us? I still have some use for the grimoire."

"Sure!" Albus grinned. "The Coven of Zero turns away no one but those bearing ill will!"

Part 4

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Part 4

2

After finishing off most of the roast bird, we set off along a small path through the woods and made it to a main road paved with sandstone. Our destination was the hideout—er, "academy"—where the Book of Zero was being kept.

Albus told us that it was two days away if we took a direct path through the woods, but we decided to go to Foamicaum first.

Albus wanted to bypass the city entirely and head directly for the academy, but I had some things to take care of in Foamicaum.

Foamicaum was a required stop for travelers heading for the capital, Prasta. Vanias' border guards had told me that I'd be checked to see whether or not I went to Foamicaum when I arrive at Prasta's fortified city walls.

In short, if I didn't get proof of entry from Foamicaum before I got to Prasta, they'd think me suspicious for wanting to avoid a major city, whatever the reason.

We were heading for Albus' academy for the time being, but our ultimate goal was to go to Prasta and search for Thirteenth, so we needed to take this detour. Although I was already leading around a witch, I still wanted try and stick to the straight and narrow by minimizing abnormalities.

Zero and I strolled along in single-file while Albus walked alone far ahead.

He looked like a complete kid as he stopped to pluck grass and stuff frogs into his bag, but when Zero explained that "he seems to be collecting offerings", my impression of him took a complete turnaround. *He might look like a kid, but he's really an untrustworthy sorcerer.* We were making a sorcerer like that take us to the witches' stronghold.

Seriously, that's depressing. Zero was probably planning to infiltrate the Coven of Zero and take back her book, but I wondered if things were going to go that smoothly. If things went well, would my head still be safe?

I may have let my inner thoughts show in my expression.

"Why the long face? Witches would not lay a finger on the possessions of another. As long as it is known that you are my manservant, none will attempt to behead you."

"That'd be great, but…it'd be all over if a group of 'em tried to take my head."

"Even if something like that were to happen, you would have nothing to fear. I will protect you."

"That's reassurin'."

"Do you think it is a lie?"

"Let's say it's the truth; do ya think I'd believe ya?"

Zero paused for a second as if in thought and smiled cheerfully, saying: “no, I do not think you would.”

“A hundred years of loneliness and a hundred betrayals—those alone make a truly tough warrior. To trust and rely on someone leads to reduced self-sufficiency, which leads to negligence, which leads to death. That is why I shall not ask that you trust me. I will protect you of my own volition. You are necessary to me.”

“That’s…reassurin’.”

Without meaning to, I let my true thoughts leak out. Returning my gaze to what was in front of me, I scratched the back of my head.

Part 5

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Part 5

—Things were progressing at an uncomfortable pace. I'd never had anyone tell me anything like "I'll protect you" or "you're necessary to me" before.

Ahead of us, Albus seemed irritated as he stopped and waited for us to catch up. Unfortunately, Zero stubbornly walked at a snail's pace.

"…You should be worried 'bout yerself; 're ya gonna be alright?" I asked.

Zero cocked her head strangely and looked at me questioningly.

"I know yer a strong witch 'n all, but we're talkin' about a group of witches who've learned magic from the Book of Zero. You ain't gonna be beaten at yer own game, are ya?"

"Ho…are you concerned for me?"

"Ya want me to explain?"

"What, that you are infatuated with me?"

"That ain't it!" I yelled.

Zero laughed loudly.

"If you are worried that I will die without fulfilling my end of our agreement, then worry not. There is not a one in a million chance that I will be defeated. I have also thought ahead to a worst-case scenario. Even if I alone am not sufficient, mine and Thirteenth's power would be a force with which none of the masses of mock witches can compete."

"Thirteenth ain't here," I muttered. Sure, they were fellow students, but Zero seemed awfully trusting of him.

No—it wasn't a matter of trust. Either way, it was obvious that they shared a bond, although what kind of bond they shared was beyond me. My train of thought stopped there, and I shook my head, disconcerted.

Zero and Thirteenth shared a bond—what of it? That's got nothing to do with me.

I should be thinking about other, more meaningful things. Right, for example—

"Hey, if there're men who can use magic, why're magic users called witches?"

Uwah…I just asked that stupid question aloud, didn't I?

Even so, Zero answered my dumb question without hesitation.

"You misunderstand the order of events. In the past, female magic users were termed witches in order to differentiate them. So, in other words, witches were originally few in number."

"Huh…first time I've heard that."

"You see, my mercenary, sorcery is, at its roots, a branch of learning. And branches of

learning are always created by men. But of course, even if men were the creators, that would not mean that men in particular excel in the field, yes?”

“Hm, seems right.”

“Well, the same can be said for sorcery; many women made great progress in the field, and the men did not like that one bit. They mocked skilled female sorcerers by calling them ‘witches’. Driven away, witches settled across the globe, and this diaspora led to sorcery being introduced to the wider world. This means that most of the world learned of sorcery from female sorcerers. Thus, the word ‘witch’ became synonymous with the word ‘sorcerer’, according to what I have heard. Because of such a sequence of events, there are many more witches nowadays, although male sorcerers certainly exist. And that existence sometimes yields, for better or for worse, dreadful power.”

“…Like Thirteenth?”

“Correct,” Zero nodded. Her voice sounded strangely sleepy and sweet.

Part 6 – complete

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Part 6

Ah, so it applies to both genders. I breathed a sigh.

“Did something happen, mercenary? Is it possible that you are jealous?”

“Don’t flatter yerself. I just feel like throwin’ up from how fond ya sound.”

As I licked the tip of my nose, Zero’s shoulders shook with laughter.

“If you hear fondness in my words, then I am sure it is jealousy. I was simply speaking of him as a man worthy of acting as my coworker.”

“Yer definition of ‘coworker’ prob’ly ain’t the same as mine, as I’m a merc.”

“Then it should be no surprise that working with him so closely has enticed my fancy. Thirteenth is an adept sorcerer. Sly and devious, he is indeed a wicked sorcerer of a man.”

“I’m beginning to see that you’re plenty evil yerself.”

“I’m hardly comparable to him. You would know if you met him, but even I would pale before him.”

“Can ya really trust someone like that…?”

“It is impossible to say. He is an adept sorcerer, but he is the embodiment of pure utilitarianism and egoism. One could almost call him demonic.”

Unexpectedly, Zero’s voice was filled with tenderness as she spoke about this “Thirteenth”.

“Then let me ask ya for reference…when ya say ‘coworker’, whaddaya mean? Are ya talkin’ about livin’ together? Ya mentioned it was in some cave.”

“Right. The study of sorcery, mercenary, is fundamentally bothersome. Sharing knowledge is mutually beneficial toward its research, so there are many witches who live together in hiding. We were the same. Thirteenth and I were a constant pair; we had arguments together, researched together, even fought together.”

In the end, it wasn’t mere fondness, was it? Hoping to change the topic from Thirteenth to something else, I pressed onward.

“Whaddaya do when yer studyin’ sorcery?”

“Well, to learn to summon demons, we peruse tomes, learn, study, and repeatedly experiment.”

“What a scholar…”

“Yes, witches are scholars. Sorcery is a science after all, and sciences take time to learn. It also takes great work to apply learned sorcery. There are certain cases in which rituals requiring up to a year’s worth of preparation time are needed. That is why witches are not prospering, and why the spread of sorcery has stagnated. And that is why—in that war five hundred years ago—the witches were defeated by the Church.”

“But now ya have magic. Can’t ya win now? Against the Church, that is.”

“Hm?” Zero made a questioning noise.

“Ah—that may be possible…it is just such a troublesome ordeal that I had never even given any thought to it…”

Just then, the sound of a horse-drawn cart’s wheels grew closer behind us, and I guided Zero out of the way, toward the edge of the road. The luggage-loaded cart passed by us—then abruptly slowed to a speed we could match at a walking pace. When we caught up with it, I found a friendly middle-aged merchant smiling at me from the driver’s seat. It was my first time experiencing something like this.

“Ah, just as I thought. Laddie, you’re a fallen beast, arentcha? You’re here to help out with the witch hunts, eh? Thanks a bundle. The way things are right now, no matter where I go, I’m always shivering in my clothes wondering if witches are goin’ to attack.”

——————————Part 6b——————————

“Back in the old days,” continued the merchant, “we were on good terms wi’them witches. I heard that, around the time when I was born, my Grandpappy went to Soulena’s for medicine. Apparently he’d broken out into a real bad fever. It’s like a fairy tale that actually happened.”

“—Didn’t they burn that witch at the stake? ‘Cause she’d caused some epidemic.”

Hearing that, the merchant frowned. Albus, too, drew closer, once he realized what was going on. He maintained some distance, but situated himself so that he could hear the conversation.

Suddenly, I had an idea. According to Albus, Soulena had used sorcery to protect a village from the plague. If that was true—

“Hey…ain’t there a chance that Soulena used sorcery ta cure the plague?”

The merchant’s eyes opened wide. He then wrinkled his brow and slowly shook his head.

“There is. Er, there was, but…not anymore.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“No one’d think badly of me if I got into a brawl, right? Before the Revels of Revenge, there were lots of people criticizing the ones who burnt Soulena to death. They were sayin’ that ‘there’s no way Soulena’d infect people with disease.’ But after the village was burnt to a crisp, everyone began to support the witch hunts—myself included.”

Looking exhausted, the merchant fished around the cargo in his driver’s seat and tossed me some fruit, which landed with a *plop*.

The merchant said that they were overripe and couldn’t be sold. Just as he said, the fruit were mottled with brown patches and gave off a sickeningly sweet scent.

“But, everyone’s rather weary of it all. We don’t want it to go on any longer, but we don’t want to lose either. That’s why I look forward to it.”

Leaving his sentence there, the merchant sped up his cart again. The cart travelled out of

sight before I could say “ah”, yet Albus kept his gaze on the back of the cart until it vanished out of sight.

Due to rain, we were forced to spend an all-nighter in a deserted house. We stopped at the first house we saw on a side path from the main road, and discovered that it was empty after meaning to borrow the barn for the night.

Starting a fire on the stove, I began making a simple meal of boiled oats in salted water. It would normally take time to start a fire on the stove, but with Zero’s magic, lighting the stove became frighteningly simple. Magic sure was convenient.

“Hey, can’t I use that? ‘Leks’, I think it was.”

“That would be impossible. Even if you tried reciting the spell, I doubt that anything would happen.”

Being told that I didn’t have the talent for the Book of Hunting made me slightly depressed. If it could let me light fires without flint, I could hold interest in even the frightening magic employed by witches.

“What determines if ya have the talent for magic anyway?”

“How much karma you have accumulated, I would think. Your mental fortitude and personality—things such as those. I already explained that the grimoire is composed of four books, but one can also be gifted in some, yet inept in others. For example, in exchange for his complete ineptitude in the Book of Safeguarding, Thirteenth is unnaturally skilled in the Book of Capturing.”

“Yer tryin’ ta say…?”

“It is most likely because of his obsession with material things. Once he acquires something, he will never let it go.”

“Hey, is that guy really okay? Can ya really depend on him?”

I knew I couldn’t conceal my concern. Zero responded lightly with “I wonder,” and cackled.

“Do you want to try some magic from other books? The Book of Hunting is out of the question, but other books like the Book of Capturing may still prove of use. It is the most effective for capturing prey alive. You can catch many, many fish too.”

“I’m gonna stop here. If I find out that I’ve got no talent in any of the books, I’m gonna have my feelings hurt.”

“Even if you have no talent, if you pursue it for ten years, you may still be able to perform basic magic. I can assign you studies as well. That will give me an excuse to stay with you forever.”

I almost overturned the pot. What was this woman going on about all of a sudden? I

looked down on her, mildly taken aback, but she did not seem as if she were kidding.

“Hey…with you sayin’ that, it seems ta me like ya wanna be with me forever.”

“What are you so astonished about? Surely that was what I said. It is enjoyable to be with you.”

It was a good thing I was clad in fur. I’d be colored an unsightly crimson if I weren’t. These lines from a witch with such an off personality made my face flush.

“Is there something wrong, mercenary?”

“There ain’t anythin’ wrong! Anyhow, I’m not gonna use magic!”

Yelling, I pushed Zero away into a corner of the room and concentrated on making dinner.

“Say, Ms. Witch…”

It was a while after we had finished dinner—I was slicing the merchant’s fruit in half with a knife, putting one half in my mouth and tossing the other to Zero, who happily bit into it.

Albus said that he “needed some fresh air,” and ventured outside into the pitch-black downpour.

I could see that he disliked sharing the same space with me. I saw that he couldn’t take the insults to Soulena, and he’s always been glaring at me, so it would seem that he’s being vigilant.

“Speakin’ truthfully, whaddaya think? Do ya think Soulena really started that epidemic?”

“Are you asking me, a witch, about that?” Zero asked cheerfully.

I shrugged and answered.

“There ain’t anyone else around ta ask.”

“—Then, mercenary, you will be asking me all sorts of things from now on, yes?”

“If yer tellin’ me ta shut up, then I’ll shut up.”

“No, that is not what I am saying.” Zero shook her head. She moved from her corner and sat down beside me with a *thump*. Sitting there, she rested her back on my shoulder and hugged her knees.

“I am happy, mercenary. Talking to you like this, I cannot help but be happy. You ask, and I answer. This way, each of us learns more about the other. —If you had someone else to pose questions to, then I would be horribly lonely.”

I didn’t say anything, but silently chewed my piece of fruit. Zero did the same, making sound as she chewed.

“Hey, why’re ya silent’? Hurry up and answer.”

“Hm?”

“The question. —I believe I asked you.”

“Ah,” Zero laughed, “then I have no choice but to answer it. The likelihood that Soulena caused the plague is decidedly low.”

“What makes ya say that?”

“Because, had she done so, she would have reaped no benefit.”

Twisting her neck looking down, Zero licked the fruit juice from her fingers.

“Plague sorcery is rudimentary sorcery. Although a novice witch may want to test it out, it is not something a witch of the chanting moon, of all witches, would. Especially since it would mean becoming the target of a witch hunt.”

“…So you’re sayin’ that when witches cause plague, it’s just them tryin’ somethin’ out?”

“If it is not done on request, then yes. On top of what has been said so far, a witch who establishes relations with neighboring humans often receives clothing and food for her divinations. So if a village is decimated by the plague, it would be to their disadvantage.”

Hmm, there are stories about how villages with thieves are, on the contrary, safe; locations with witches seemed to be the same.

“I do not claim that witches are kind. Witches often seek scenarios with the best outcomes for themselves. However, because of this, the possibility that a witch of the chanting moon was the bringer of the plague is low indeed.”

If we assume that, then humans really did mistakenly burn the very witch who had been protecting them at the stake. It was just that exactly at the time of the plague, she had been a sorcery-practicing witch. That was their only rationale.

—I had gone through similar experiences. I was falsely accused of murder and rape just because I was a fallen beast, and driven out of town. These occasions were not at all uncommon.

Assuming that Soulena had been killed by the residents of the village she had set out to save, imagining the sadness and anger that had arisen was not a difficult task. So of course the witches had risen in a rage, and sunk the village in a sea of fire.

—If that was true, then it was the humans who had started the war.

“Even among witches, there is diversity, mercenary. There are witches who would harm humans, and those who work for the good of all.”

I had been prejudiced. I had thought that all witches were evil, that they left not a single survivor from their wrongdoings.

Achoo! A sneeze sounded outside the door. Albus entered the room, looking cold. From the unpleasant look on his face, I could tell that he had been eavesdropping.

But I didn’t pester him about it. No, instead—

“Sorry ‘bout that, insultin’ ya ’n all…”

Albus opened his eyes wide as if surprised, and frowned stubbornly. However, it was a frown of someone trying to stop their expression from softening.

“Well, idiots have misunderstandings all the time, and I’m pretty generous, so I’ll let you off the hook. So next time, think before you speak, alright?”

I felt like hitting him for a moment, but decided to forgive him this time for the sake of driving home my apology.

Part 7

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Part 7

The next morning, the sky was clear and cloudless, with no rain in sight. Just as he had done yesterday, Albus walked ahead of us on the path, but today he stopped frequently to tell us to hurry up.

“Hurry! The gates are gonna close!”

Ahead of us, an impatient Albus waved his fist and yelled.

Of course a town protected by walls would also have a gate. Such gates are closed at sunset, and remain so until the next morning. Still, the sun now hung at its zenith, and it would only take us a short while to reach the town. I didn’t think that there was any reason to rush, but I decided that it would be good to get there early and find my billet.

“Aren’t ya gonna hurry up?” I asked Zero.

Stubbornly maintaining a sluggish pace, Zero yawned listlessly.

“Well, I abhor sweat.”

“Eh, well…then how ‘bout this?”

“Hm? Ah…wha—hey!”

I gathered Zero into my arms and ran past Albus, leaving him in the dust.

“Hey!” Albus yelled as he ran after us. “Wait for me!”

And so, we arrived in Foamicaum.

“Form a line! Single file! Merchants should prepare their special licenses, mercenaries their letters of introduction, and the rest their entry permits! Do not delay!”

Set in a wall that seemed capable of withstanding a day’s bombardment, a two-leaf gate was open just wide enough to allow a single cart to pass at a time. In front of the gate were four gatekeepers, as if to say that anyone without an entry permit would have no chance of getting through. One of the guards was yelling as he ordered the line of people waiting to enter, while one of the others—higher-ranked, by the different color of his uniform—kept a vigilant watch as he looked over entry permits.

“You may proceed! Next!”

With that, the frontmost-queued merchant’s unease vanished, supplanted by an expression of relief as he led his wagon onward and disappeared through the gate. We inserted ourselves midway into the line, and I felt hopelessness wash over me.

To enter any major city, one almost always needed something called an entry permit. When a villager felt the urge to embark on a journey, he first needed to visit his village chief and obtain a letter of introduction. Then, he needed to take this letter and bring it to a town’s governmental office, where he would receive an entry permit after providing his name, birthplace, and profession.

Merchants received special passes from their guilds, which were renewed when they paid a yearly fee, while mercenaries received letters of introduction by surviving battles.

But obviously, a witch and a sorcerer like Zero and Albus would have no entry permits. Meaning that I would have to request their entry as my companions, but…

How was I going to explain the rag-wearing beauty and the loser of a kid?

“I’ve always wanted to visit Foamicaum! I can’t wait!”

“Shut yer mouth. Don’t get so worked up. I’ll kill ya, shitty kid.”

“Zerooo! The mercenary’s glaring at me!”

“Don’t pick on those weaker than you, mercenary. The youngster is saying that he is fortunate to be able to travel with you. Be glad.”

“That’s not what I’m saying!”

“I ain’t gonna be thankful for that!”

Suspicious looks were directed toward me, as I’d raised my voice without thinking. Although I already stood out enough just by being a fallen beast, it didn’t bother me to be obtrusive. I heaved a sigh.

In the space of my sigh, the queue progressed forward, and it was my turn to talk with the gatekeeper whether I wanted to or not. I held out the letter of introduction I had been issued by the border patrol.

“I heard that yer gatherin’ troops ta fight them witches, so I’m headin’ to the capital ta help out.”

I repeated to him, somewhat stiffly, the words I had rehearsed countless times. It wasn’t a lie. At least, it hadn’t been two days ago; but as expected, it was difficult for me to utter those words while accompanying a witch and a sorcerer.

Sure enough, the gatekeeper honed in on Zero—who wore her hood over her eyes and whose appearance screamed “I am, without a doubt, a witch”—and Albus, who appeared frail and far too childlike to be a traveler.

“Are these two your companions? What is your relation?”

Ah, here it comes. It wasn’t that I didn’t have an excuse, but…

“Well…”

“We are his body-slaves.” Zero swiftly answered.

All of the fur on my body stood on end.

Just a sec, this woman—

“Y-yes! We perform services for our master, and are no more than lowly slaves. Of course. We also perform nighttime services…”

Woah there, Albus. You’re a guy. What’re ya pullin’, blushin’ like that? Yer kinda cute ta begin with, so things ain’t gonna turn out well. I’ve been made out ta be a complete pervert, haven’t I?

“I…I see…oh. I see…”

And you, guard, investigate ‘em more. Investigate ‘em and figure it out. It’s completely wrong. It’s so wrong, but I can’t say a thing. This is why people say fallen beasts ‘re depraved. With a gaze that betrayed neither his fear, his hate, nor his envy, the gatekeeper looked at me and my two body-slaves.

“Yes…these two slaves appear to be empty handed. There is a tax for each slave, however it is waived for lone travelers such as yourself. A few days ago, a small town near here was attacked by witches, so witch hunting warriors like yourself are greatly welcomed. How long will you be staying?”

“Ah—…’round…three days…I guess…” I managed to squeeze out a few words. I didn’t plan to stay any longer than a night, but it was a good idea to declare an extra two days in case anything happened.

“If you’re heading to Prasta, then be sure to get a confirmation of entry stamp on your letter of introduction. And when you depart, make sure to return your sojourner’s permit. —You may proceed!”

Just like that, we were granted entry into Foamicaum.

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Part 8

Volume 1 — Chapter 3: The Coven of Zero

Part 8

All’s well that ends well… but still. After we had walked a distance from the gates and I had confirmed that we were far away enough, I gave both Zero and Albus a good wallop.

“I did not expect to be struck as thanks for my acumen,” Zero grumbled as she rubbed the spot I had hit, surveying the dizzying hustle and bustle with great interest.

“Since ages past, warriors across the globe and across centuries have been accompanied by slaves, yes? Every book counsels to declare oneself a slave if one’s identity is ever called into question. And it proved efficacious, did it not?”

Albus pouted in agreement.

“That’s right! Like, if a fallen beast was going around with a shabbily dressed girl and a guy with my looks, that would be the most realistic explanation, wouldn’t it?”

“Shut yer mouth! Ya got me treated like a perverted bastard who “plays” with his two poor slaves every night! What’s worse is that one of ‘em is a guy, and a kid to boot! It’s perverted…it’s a sign of depravity…”

“It’s okay, you got the sojourner’s permit no matter what the guard thought of you…how were *you* gonna write it off then, mercenary?”

“Well, I’d…I’d do it properly.”

“Properly huh,” Albus spoke with a sarcastic tone. “Even if you managed to come up with some excuse, Zero’s clothes are just too raggedy. Look, everyone’s staring at her. Even slaves have better clothes nowadays…”

Albus took a long hard look at Zero’s garb, starting from the top of her head to the toes of her feet.

That’s when I noticed Zero wasn’t even wearing shoes. Her robes were old, stained, and tattered. If she’d been on her own, Zero could have passed for an impoverished traveler, but I was a warrior wearing riveted leather armor, outfitted with a sword, knife, explosives, and other equipment, while Albus could pass as a neat merchant’s maid. With the three of us together, it really was easiest and safest to introduce Zero as a slave.

I didn’t think that there was any need for Albus to dress like a slave too… Well, since we’d already gotten into town without incident, I didn’t see any point in continuing to worry over it.

“Mercenary, mercenary. What might that be?”

As if ignoring mine and Albus’ ruminations, Zero gestured with curiosity—not toward something of concern—but at an impassioned pair of lovers.

They pressed their faces together under the open air, sampling necklaces and contentedly exchanging words like: “which one suits me?” It was also no surprise that they slipped in kisses whenever they could.

“I wish I could…”

“make them stop!” I quickly corrected myself.

“They’re so into one another that they don’t even care ‘bout the stares they’re gettin’. Must be a happy couple.”

Although I’d said it myself, I still felt a pang of jealousy. But I wasn’t some saint who could live his life free from envy, and I wouldn’t be even if I were more mature. As for giving up on love, well, I’d pretty much already reached that point. But still, since Zero’d promised me a human form, I wasn’t devoid of hope for the future.

“Why all this fixation on the lips? Is it some sort of ritual?”

“…What, ya don’t know what a kiss is?”

“Kiss?”

Zero gazed in disbelief at the couple, then turned to face me again.

“A kiss is the act of pressing one’s lips to a demon’s—”

I clapped a hand over Zero’s mouth. I wasn’t going to let her spew stuff out in public; I had a hunch that those words were nothing but nasty. With how much Zero was struggling, it didn’t seem like it had been just a bad joke either.

“Sonny, don’t tell me you too…?”

He didn’t give me a “what”, but whipped his head left and right.

“I-I’m not that clueless about how the world works!”

“Well then, I guess that’s fine. Hey witch, ya listenin’? A kiss is a way for two people ta show their love for each other. It *ain’t* some vomit-inducing, sick thing that’s got anythin’ ta do with demons. Why’d ya think that in the first place?”

“Having been engrossed, along with my fellow students, in a sea of books, I have become ignorant of the customs of this world. That is the price of my wholehearted devotion to research.”

I felt that it was pretty impressive for someone like that to be quick-witted enough to come up with an excuse like “body-slaves”.

“That is because I am a prodigy.”

“Don’t just go around readin’ people’s minds.”

“What I read was not your mind, but your expression.”

“Hmph, is that so…”

“I was born within a cave, raised within that cave, and have only recently departed said cave.”

For a moment, I thought she was pulling my leg and looked over at Albus. His head was tilted in confusion as if troubled, and as I watched, he nodded. His expression said “it’s possible”. *Huh, she’s not screwing with me.* Assuming that she wasn’t, then her story really wasn’t a joke.

I wasn’t sure how to react, so I pulled a wry face and faced Zero. However, she did not seem like she was holding back any sorrow. No. Rather, she gazed up at me as if she had been struck by some bright idea. Under her hood, Zero’s eyes glittered with boundless curiosity.

“Have you done it before, mercenary?”

“Eh? What?”

“A kiss.”

I haven’t, I barked in my mind.

“I haven’t!”

I did so audibly as well, albeit somewhat more loudly than I had done in my mind.

Once I had admitted this, Zero smiled and nodded, pleased.

“Then we are even. Youngster, I trust that you have not either?”

“M-me? N-no no no! There isn’t even anyone…that wants to do it with me yet…”

How unexpected. I felt relieved. I hadn’t lost to this guy when it came to a question of manhood.

“Love is exchanged through kisses…? Hm, most fascinating. I would like to try it out.”

So would I.

“Would you like to attempt it with me, mercenary?”

“Huh?!”

Without thinking, I looked at Zero’s lips. They were exquisitely formed, and shone like the polished ruby skin of an apple ripened to perfection. If I touched her lips with mine, it would undoubtedly be sacrilege. —No, it already was.

“Uh…I told ya it’s a way to show your love for someone…”

“That is precisely why I suggested we try it. I have a liking for you, after all.”

“Eh…pish. Tha–“

Part 9

Volume 1 — Chapter 3: The Coven of Zero

Part 9

“Even if you do not believe me, you did tell me to take a better attitude earlier, yes? I am a devastatingly gorgeous woman. Surely even you would like to touch these lips of mine.”

“Your good looks wasted away with that line. That, and I just don’t like witches. That stuff doesn’t work on me.”

“You are a cold man… I am left with no other choice. If mercenary finds the thought displeasing, then youngling…”

Zero looked over Albus for quite some time. He flushed crimson and hid behind me, yelling: “no, no, you can’t, I don’t wanna!”

“Don’t tease the kid. More importantly, don’t ya have a change of clothes?”

“Does it appear that I do?”

Zero spread her arms wide for inspection. I’d figured before her retort, but besides a small pouch that hung at her waist, she had no other items on her.

“How’d ya even get here like that…”

“I washed my clothes and bathed in each river I came across, caught birds when I went hungry, and picked every fruit and berry I could find. When I encountered other people, I avoided them, and when it rained, I would find a cave to hide in. I salvaged a pot from a deserted village so that I could cook. Such is how I journeyed here alone.”

“Amazing, I know,” Zero said, her pride evident in her smile. I was at my wit’s end.

“Anyway… with ya lookin’ like that, we aren’t even gonna be able ta find a place ta stay. Even an inn that would accommodate someone like me wouldn’t rent us anything other than their stables.”

“I am content to sleep outside. It is most comfortable to sleep cocooned in your fur.”

“Even if it’s comfortable, it’s gonna be inconvenient. It’ll draw too much attention to us. You’ll be arrested just for standin’ out.”

I wasn’t exaggerating. There were plenty of innocent people convicted and executed for simply “standing out”.

It appeared that we had to get some decent clothes for Zero. It was the most urgent problem at hand.

“Hey witch, you got any cash on ya?”

I expected her to respond in the same manner as before, perhaps with a “does it appear that I do?” But instead, Zero nodded, said “I see,” and gestured for me to hold out my hands.

As I did as I was told, Zero rummaged around in her pouch and pulled something out.

She placed it in my hands, whereupon it scattered into a small heap. It was—a bunch of

gemstones.

“I departed the cave with a number of them. Bijoux hold intrinsic value in any era and any country, I believe. I thought that they might prove to be useful. Could these serve as a substitute?”

I couldn’t close my wide-open jaw. My fur bristled as I stood there, a mound of gems in my hands, unable to so much as twitch.

Albus peered into my hands as well, and adopted a wide-eyed look identical to mine.

“Ya idiot! Don’t show off somethin’ like this in the streets!”

Rapidly regaining my senses, I poured all of the jewels back into Zero’s pouch. “Wah,” Zero yelped as if she hadn’t been paying attention, and looked at me as if she were seeing something strange.

“I presented them to you in response to your question, so why are you possessed of this anger?”

“I’m just tellin’ ya to consider how much yer showin’ me and where yer doin’ it. It would’ve been more than enough ta show me just one as proof. Just the smallest gem would’ve been perfect.”

“Such as this one?” Zero spoke, extracting a minuscule gemstone. Even it possessed a startling pellucidity that would drive a pauper mad. I had thought about paying in Zero’s stead if she hadn’t the funds, but with merely the stone in her hand, our financial fortunes had taken a complete turnaround. Instead, there was now an insurmountable wall before me. As a mercenary, I was thankful that my employer was filthy rich, but as a man, I felt defeated.

Still, I hid those feelings, and in a deliberately even tone, I replied: “that’s fine.” I felt like a fool as I stood there, nodding.

“Let’s go exchange that for some coin and buy you some clothes. There should be a money changer somewhere ‘round here…”

Zero deposited the grain of a jewel into my hand and chuckled, a broad smile on her face.

“As I thought, you are a good man.”

“…Huh?”

“That’s outta the blue,” I retorted, bending my head forward. *Clink clink,* Zero patted her pouch.

“No matter what pretext you may have presented, you were most likely capable of snatching this away from me. I am quite ignorant about this world, after all.”

“Are you an idiot? There’s no way I’d have the guts ta do that to a witch who faces demons.”

“Therefore, had I not been a witch, you would have purloined it from me?”

“‘Course. I’m a greedy mercenary, after all.”

“Wrong. No way. No, no. Not with how you were shaking and panicking when she handed

them to you.”

Albus laughed foolishly as he interrupted us. *I should give him a good whack.*

“Ow—! What? It’s the truth! Grow a pair, you coward!”

“Should I give ya another one? Huh? Ya wanna taste another one?”

“No~” Albus replied like a girl and ducked behind Zero.

Heh heh, Zero’s shoulders shook. Then—

“Ah—what a cerulean sky.”

Out of the blue, she said something strange. Interested, I turned my gaze skyward, where there was indeed not a cloud to be seen.

Part 10

Volume 1 — Chapter 3: The Coven of Zero

Part 10

“I-I believe these clothes might fit you nicely…”

A voice which could be described only as beguiling exuded into existence. It was a voice for currying favor with others, and was high pitched and saccharine. It was a giant who stunk like a bandit leader—although I certainly wasn’t in any position to criticize his hygiene—speaking. We were looking through a thrift store in the run-down part of town to buy Zero some clothes.

Crooks frequented places like this to sell their stolen goods, so occasionally one would see the odd finery lying around. The purveyor was showing Zero exactly such a piece.

“Ol’ man. I thought I told ya she’s lookin’ for travellin’ clothes…”

As I studied the vibrant noblewoman’s dress, my whiskers twitched.

“As he says. I am seeking something else.”

At Zero’s words, the shopkeeper snatched up the next piece of clothing and held it up for examination.

“Ah, then this dress—“

“I toldya, travellin’ clothes! Stop pullin’ out fluttery dresses that don’t even fit her looks, ya moron!”

“Shut up, ya stupid furball! I’m tryin’ to show this young lady some clothes!”

“How ‘bout it, miss?” The man drawled in a cracked voice, the result of having had too much to drink. Zero looked over the dress held before her and refused curtly, saying “It is not to my liking.” At her words, the shopkeeper relaxed as if spellbound, said, “Of course this old dress would not be fitting for you, my lady,” and retreated further into the store.

It had been a mistake for Zero to reveal her face. It pains me to say so, but Zero is undeniably a great looker. The moment she’d stepped through the doors and pulled back her hood, the formerly chilly atmosphere within the shop had melted away into a lovestruck one, and the shopkeeper had appointed himself as her manservant.

“He’s gotta be pretty desperate to be like this…”

Albus muttered a few words at the obsequious shopkeeper, who was even now running around to try and curry Zero’s favor. “Don’t say anythin’,” I let my shoulders droop.

“Unlike kids, some of the men are that desperate…’specially the ugly ones. Even harlots won’t service ‘em. ‘Course, it’s probably a whole ‘nother story if you’re loaded with cash…”

There were plenty of men who would be thankful to merely be able to breathe the same air as a woman as beautiful as Zero. The only thing keeping me from stooping to the shopkeeper’s level was the fact that Zero was a witch, and I hated witches. If it weren’t for that, I’d probably be laying myself at her feet just as he was.

“Mercenary, mercenary.”

I felt her tugging on my sleeve and lowered my gaze.

“I feel that this is adequate.”

As she spoke, Zero pointed out a sable overcoat that was lying in a corner of the store. It was long sleeved, and I could tell that it was made for men. On Zero, the coat would probably reach halfway down her legs.

“It is well built yet light, and the added warmth will be welcome. I am pleased with the hood as well. What say you, mercenary?”

It looked heavy to hold, but was actually light and soft. Assuming the lining was well-built, then the overcoat definitely seemed to be of a sturdy make. It would function moderately well as a traveling coat. I felt that she should decide what she would wear, but it seemed that she was seeking my opinion as a well-traveled mercenary.

“It’s a good find. Ain’t half bad. It’s just a bit big—“

Zero’s face brightened.

“Good. I am pleased with this. If mercenary approves, then I do as well.”

It seemed that she placed a great deal of trust in me. If I had disapproved, would she have too?

Having been browsing around, Albus broke into a run as he headed further into the store.

“Ah, socks! Hey merc, these’ll come in handy. They’re so much simpler to put on compared to wrapping cloth over your feet! You won’t get blisters, and they warm your feet too!”

Albus held up a pair of very long socks for me to see. They would probably cover up to half of his legs if he were to wear them. It seemed that one held them in place by tying tight their decorative twines. Contrary to the overcoat, these were very ornamental pieces made for women, but they seemed sufficient for practical use. They probably protected against the cold too.

“Hey, w—“

I was about to call her “witch”, but hurriedly stopped myself.

We had company. It was probably not a good idea.

“…Zero.”

She looked up, having been examining the laid-out overcoat with a pleased look on her face.

“He found some socks.”

I exchanged a look with Albus, who grabbed the socks and ran back to where he had been.

“You still need shoes…ah! These are nice. Definitely these!”

He was as excited as if he were picking out his own pieces of clothing. Just the act of shopping was probably fun. What Albus held in his hands as he returned to us was a pair

of long boots reaching up to the knees. Made out of firm leather, they would be resistant against water and mud. I rubbed Albus on the head.

“You’ve got a good eye. They ain’t bad.”

“Pooh!” Albus puffed out his chest.

Zero took a look at them, and went “hrm” in a sullen tone.

“I prefer to walk barefoot. The dirt is warm, and the grass is soft. The dampness of the dew is also pleasant.”

“Don’t ya get hurt?”

“It is fine if I walk slowly.”

“Sometimes we’re gonna need ta move quickly…if ya think I’ll just carry ya in my arms every time that’s the case, then ya got another thing comin’.”

“Then will you leave me behind? What a heartless man.”

“Do you see me as a man of deep emotions?”

“You do possess some deep fur.”

“Don’t make me hit ya. Anyway, you’re gonna need those boots.”

At my curt reply, Zero pouted in disappointment.

It took all my willpower to turn a deaf ear as Zero badmouthed me, complaining that “it would be fine for you to carry me around”, “don’t be so miserly”, and “you are so large, and yet…”

“So with the way things are, ya can’t wear any pants besides short ones, but I guess it’s easier ta move around that way.”

As I spoke, Albus got his hands on a ridiculously short pair of pants that looked like they belonged on a female thief. They’d probably allow for better movement, but would be severely lacking in protection for the skin. Although, with the boots, socks, and overcoat, some skimpy clothing might not matter…

“Hey, ol’ man! We’ve decided, give us the bill!”

Hollering into the depths of the store, I saw the shopkeeper emerge, arms full with a mass of brightly colored cloth, and a disappointed look on his face.

“Change here. We’re gonna burn the stuff you’re wearin’. It’d just be baggage.”

“Are you instructing me to burn to cinders a longtime friend?”

“It ain’t good ta have long relationships. When making new friends, ya need ta say goodbye to the old ones.”

“What a heartless man. Although, I do not find you disagreeable.”

Chuckling, Zero stripped and flung away her raggedy old robes.

In that moment, I stiffened. Albus’ jaw dropped, and the shopkeeper fainted as blood spurted out of his nose.

Skin as pale as if I were awakening from sleep, and a thin waist. Such a body was more magnificent in appearance than a statue of a goddess, sculpted over a lifetime by an artist of unmatched skill, would be. It was a flawless form.

Right now, I was gazing at its full glory.

Zero had not been wearing any undergarments.

“—What? Is the female form such an exceptional sight to behold?”

Part 11

Volume 1 — Chapter 3: The Coven of Zero

Part 11

Hyu, I took a sharp intake of air.

The next moment, I uttered a wordless howl of confusion, and as I was raising hell, I pulled Zero's discarded robes over my head. Waking the prostrate storekeeper, I gathered up the underwear we had picked out, and threw them along with Zero into the depths of the store. I roared at her to stay there until she had put all of them on, whereupon she responded:

"That hurt! You are always so violent! A lady should be treated more gently!"

"If that's what ya think, then look up the word 'modesty' in a dictionary 'n take a year ta mull over what it means!"

Albus and the storekeeper were seated behind our shouting match.

"H-holy shit… holy shit…!"

"That was beautiful… I-I c'n die happy now!"

It was clear that these creatures called witches wouldn't fit into normal society. Among them, Zero seemed to be one exceptionally so.

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On her were the length-challenged trousers, the long socks which reached halfway up her legs, and the enormous overcoat complete with a hood. Frankly speaking, Zero didn't look like an honest to goodness normal person, but she had made huge strides toward that goal. With her face, I felt that the staff of any high-end inn we might visit would be more than happy to lodge us in their best rooms, but considering they'd make a fuss during our stay, I decided to defer that possibility in exchange for a lodging in the boonies.

I had meant to burn Zero's old robes, but with the storekeeper loudly insisting that he would give us everything he owned for them, I worked out a deal with him to waive our bill in exchange for
the raggedy piece of clothing. It was a cloak which had spent many years in contact with Zero. Thus, it wasn't hard to imagine the value of such an item in the eyes of a middle-aged man who'd had no encounters with attractive women.

Confirming that she was fine with handing her robes over to the moronic man, Zero declared that it wasn't her problem how the friend she had bid farewell to would be treated. *She's so cold*, I thought, a laugh escaping my throat, although I was probably just as unfeeling.

"Mercenary, mercenary."

I was walking along with Zero in my arms when I felt my ears being forcefully tugged. *Ow, ya little shit of a witch.*

"I smell something scrumptious. I'm hungry."

I looked over at where Zero was pointing. There was a side street clustered with miscellaneous shops. A row of food carts occupied a section of the street, all of them enthusiastically promoting their foodstuffs to passersby.

Some carts offered peeled fruits, while others roasted chunks of meat. I was the same as her—I was getting hungry. I was about to ask whether they wanted to stop for a meal before heading for an inn, but Albus had already dashed toward one of the carts. Zero leapt out of my arms and chased after him.

"…Wh—you guys, wait a sec! Yer leavin' one of yer own behind!"

No matter what I howled, my words didn't seem to reach them. I ran after them, carving a path through the crowd. When I finally caught up, I found Zero and Albus already sinking their teeth into their meals, both having ordered the same thing. Namely, well-done entrails and vegetables sandwiched between two pieces of bread, a dish of the masses.

It seemed, from the cart owner's self-satisfied expression, that Zero had paid more money than she should have, not knowing the street price. Seeing that I was Zero's companion, the cart owner pushed an extra-large sandwich with a slab of meat inside toward me.

"The meat is delicious, mercenary. You should try it."

"These vegetables are so crispy! They taste so good!"

As I looked at the two of them, grease coating their mouths, faces stuffed full of bread, I thought that no amount of reprimand could correct their boorishness. I resignedly bit into my food.

It wasn't hard to find a place to stay.

In a big town like this one, there was no shortage of inns that were willing to accommodate guests with special circumstances. The old man who ran the reception desk didn't even bat an eye at my being a fallen beast, and we successfully obtained a room for two and a room for one for the night.

"Yer with me, sonny."

"Eh—?! Why, I don't wanna! I'm getting my own room."

"No you're not. I can't be sure yer not gonna run that way. You're gonna stay where I can see ya."

"If you share a room with me, there's a chance you'll lose your head in your sleep, you know?"

I calmly removed a coil of rope which hung from my waist. For better or worse, I wasn't one to feel guilty for tying up a kid and dumping them in a corner.

"Z-Zero, help me!"

Letting out a miserable voice, Albus again hid himself behind Zero.

"Do not be cruel to children, mercenary."

“Then I’ll share a room with Zero! It’s fine as long as I’m not alone, right?”

Still clinging to Zero’s back, Albus began making his ridiculous request. The perverted little devil. If he thought that putting on an innocent face would make me give him whatever he wanted, then he was in for a big surprise. I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and dragged his struggling form into our room.

Though Albus had struggled and protested however he could, once I threw him onto the bed and left him there, it didn’t take long for him to fall asleep. He’d said that the stink of animals would keep him awake, but he surrendered to it pretty quick. Sure that he was pretending to be sleeping so that he could take something of mine, I checked to see whether he was awake, just to make sure. It seemed that he really was fast asleep.

“Seriously? That’s a kid for ya.”

Part 12-A

Volume 1 — Chapter 3: The Coven of Zero

Part 12A

Albus had to be exhausted. He probably hadn't gotten even a moment's rest for the past few days, as he'd chased me around the forest, spent a night escaping Zero's Etrauk, and attacked me once again the morning after. He probably hadn't slept well in the broken-down house last night either, so it wasn't a surprise that he couldn't resist the beckoning of a soft bed and warm sheets.

"It's not like I don't get the feelin' of wantin' more power…"

With a neatly trimmed nail, I gently poked Albus in the cheek.

As I did so, Albus frowned and curled into a ball, behaving like an animal much to my amusement. I began to feel slightly mischievous—but though my target was just a kid, he was still a sorcerer.

At any rate, I had to take a bath and wash off all the filth from my long journey. It'd be weird to be too clean as a mercenary, but I didn't want to contract skin disease from being too filthy. Us fallen beasts could become infested with fleas as well.

First, I had to go find the old man at the reception desk and ask him to get some hot water prepared for me. Since I was covered in fur, washing myself was a more complicated task than just wetting a towel and scrubbing myself with it. The only way for a mucked-up fallen beast to rid himself of dirt and fleas was to find a sufficiently-large pool of steaming-hot water and lower his entire body into it, washing his entire body whole.

Fantasizing about bathing in the yard before the sun went down so that I could dry myself in its rays, I was about to leave the room—but first, I decided to tie Albus securely to the bed, and made my way out of the room only after looking over my handiwork.

"Taking a bath, mercenary?"

I was in the yard.

The old man at the reception desk had made no indication whether or not he'd felt threatened by my blood-, mud-, and grass-stained self, and performed his duty perfectly.

I was handed a tub used for bathing and given three bucketfuls of hot water. It was decided that, as compensation, I would draw water from the well to replace the amount I use.

"Take this, on the house," the old man said, handing me a bar of kneaded soap. It was obvious that it was a bar of laundry soap, but to be fair, my washcloth and fur couldn't tell the difference. As a result, my body was covered in suds when Zero trudged toward me and squatted down beside me, as if she were seeing something very curious.

"A monster of fur and soapsuds, eh? The youngsters of the neighborhood are peeping at you from their places of hiding. Eagerly so."

"They…they ain't scared?"

“Fear is acquired *a posteriori*. Provided that you do not frighten them, I believe that they shall not be afraid beyond reason.”

“Well, the smaller kids’ll get scared ’n cry.”

“Beyond reason, I said. If a colossal carnivorous beast were to appear in front of a person, he or she would fear it instinctually.”

So they are scared, aren’t they? As I mulled over it, frowning, Zero made eye contact with their hiding place by accident. There were three kids peeking at me as if they were watching a show.

Baring my fangs, I roared at them, and they scattered while screaming loudly in fear.

“…Do you wish to be feared?”

“I’m not gonna be somethin’ people look forward to watchin’. —Actually, it’s better ta stay away from fallen beasts. We’re treated like monsters all our lives. So ‘course there’d be plenty of us who actually become monsters, ya know?”

“Humans make their monsters—yes?”

“That’s right. Well, it could just be in our nature.”

“You are mistaken. In actuality, your soul possesses a great deal of humanity.”

“Who knows?”

I couldn’t possibly judge on my own whether or not I behaved like a human. On top of that, I couldn’t even normally build relationships with humans. Thinking about it was pointless because the point of comparison wasn’t close in the first place. Whenever I heard talk about being human and being humane, I would feel like I were no longer human.

“Make not such a face. If you are not human, I will wish for the rest of the world to be the same.”

“Ta have a witch wish for somethin’ like that…”

Well, it was time to stop being gloomy. But in my mind, that meant only changing the words coming out of my mouth. I turned my gaze up at the sky and gave a small sigh, blowing some bubbles into the air. Poking at a gently drifting bubble, Zero leapt to her feet, as though she had thought of an idea.

“It must be toilsome to bathe yourself when you have such a large frame. I will aid you by washing your back.”

“Aren’t ya Ms. Generous. Didn’t ya say that ya hate ta sweat?”

“Of course, I will stop before that point. Moreover, I am sure that washing an enormous beast will be most fun.”

Part 12-B

Volume 1 — Chapter 3: The Coven of Zero

Part 12B

Without waiting for permission, Zero placed her hands on my back. She worked up a lather with the bar of soap as she ran her fingers through my fur. It tickled like hell.

“Hey, mercenary. Towns sure are fun places, are they not?”

“Ah?”

“Many people reside within them, and each person has his or her own duty to fulfill and his or her own way of thinking, yes? I think that is amazing. Not only that, but the food carts’ cuisine suits me well.”

“If that’s all ya want, anywhere in the slightly bigger towns—“ I stopped mid-sentence.

Oh, right. Zero had never even taken a step outside of her cave before, much less been to a town.

That being the case, of course she’d be all amazed and excited. The congestion in the streets was annoying to me, and the food from the food carts was nothing to rave about, but from Zero’s perspective, these things were new experiences.

There was no doubt that Zero, being a witch, had more knowledge than I could even imagine.

However, she was lacking in her knowledge of the outside world. What Zero would think of as common knowledge would not be so for me, and what I thought of as normal and widely known would not be so for Zero. We may look at the same things, but we each perceive the world around us differently.

“…It’s ‘cause Vanias is a country of tourists and travelers, and Foamicaum is the heart of all that tradin’. People ’n goods come here from all over the world. It ain’t that wide in scope, but it’s condensed.

“Ah,” Zero’s eyes sparkled.

“I would not have been able to enter this city on my own. Even if I had managed to gain entry, I would most likely have caused some kind of disturbance. You have, in this short time, made me aware of things I knew not. I am thankful that we crossed paths.”

—*Was this also because she lacked common sense?* I frowned as Zero uttered her embarrassing lines, and looked over my shoulder to scowl at her.

“…You, stop sayin’ stuff like that.”

“Stuff like that?”

“Like sayin’ that ya like me, that yer thankful that we crossed paths, shitty lines like those. Women don’t just give people their favor for no reason. ‘Specially not to a man like me.”

“Favor?” Zero repeated strangely.

“But it is the truth. I enjoy speaking with you, so I find it unbearable to remain silent.”

“I just told ya ta stop that—“

“Is it disagreeable…to converse with me?”

With a gulp, I shut up.

That wasn’t it. That wasn’t it, but…

“I don’t understand yer way of speakin’…basically, the only conversations I have are where everyone curses at ’n insults each other.”

That was why I really couldn’t understand when I was spoken to with kindness. Still frowning, I spat out.

“Is that so,” Zero muttered.

“Then it will be good to practice with me, yes? I will continue to speak often from here on out.”

No way. I wasn’t able to convince her otherwise. It didn’t seem like there was anything else to do but to just get used to it.

“Don’t get mad if I ignore ya, aight?”

“Of course I shall be angry. I wish to converse. It’s no fun to speak on my own.”

“Then get as angry as ya like.”

“You are such a heartless man. It would not hurt to behave more kindly toward me. I *am* your master, you know?”

“A mercenary doesn’t do anythin’ besides what they were hired ta do.”

“Humph,” Zero made a dispirited noise and began making strange finger movements on my back as she washed it. It felt as if she were writing something. I wondered if they were letters and tried to focus, but couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

Then, Zero chuckled.

“Somethin’ goin’ on?”

“That is a secret.”

“Oi…”

“You will know soon enough. And then you shall be grateful to me, and unable to resist serving my will. This is that kind of a spell. Frightening, isn’t it?”

“Stop jokin’ around! Get it off me right now!”

“I-don’t-wanna. Here, turn your back toward me. I cannot wash it the way it is now.”

My threat had no effect on Zero; and if threats didn’t work, then I had no choice but to obey. I obediently turned my back toward her. Having cleaned my body thoroughly and washed all of the soapsuds off with boiling water, I felt rejuvenated. Zero looked over me and put on a troubled expression.

“All clean. Hm…ah…you look completely different now.”

“Yer sayin’ I look like a wet cat, ain’t ya…”

Just like how drenched animals were the epitome of all things pitiable, drenched fallen beasts looked just as deserving of compassion. As she rubbed my fur with a dry cloth, Zero began looking around at our surroundings.

“Hey, what’re ya—“

“It’s a secret.”

Laughing, Zero waved her finger lightly. In an instant, it had dried. My fur, that is.

I reacted without thinking—definitely without thinking.

“Amazing! Oi, what did you do and how did you do it?! It usually takes me half a day ta dry this stuff! It’s so soft and fluffy! I could be the quilt for a bed at the imperial castle!”

I raved out loud. Was calling myself a quilt at the royal castle a bit too masochistic? Even if it was, it was probably the greatest praise one could give to a pelt.

“Wait…are ya stupid? Whaddaya think yer doin’, doin’ that out in the open like this?”

I came to my senses. Zero looked at me with annoyed look on her face.

“You do know that, if you do not decide between berating and praising me, then the effects of both actions are halved…? I made sure that we had no spectators. We are fine.”

“If that’s true…well, then I guess there’s no problem.”

“By the way, mercenary.”

“Hm?”

“Is it alright for you to leave your lower body bare? You made a big deal over my doing so in the thrift store, but you seem quite open about it yourself.”

Zero’s gaze fell on my lower abdomen.

I yelped and hurriedly stuck a foot into my pants as my cheeks flushed from Zero’s loud laughter.

At that moment, an unpleasant aura flooded the yard.

From around the corner of the building came four figures, three female and one male. What stood out was the man’s face; he had the face of a dog. The hairs on my back stood on end as a nasty smell wafted over; sure enough, it was another of my kind—a fallen beast.

“Oh. Oh? Eeeh? What, ‘re ya like me?”

I ain’t yer kin. Don’t lump me in with yerself, ya dumb mutt.

“We’re leavin’.”

I hurried Zero as I gathered up the various tubs and buckets in my arms, and we began walking out of there.

Inherently, fallen beasts didn’t get along with other fallen beasts. We couldn’t stand each other’s bestial stench, and even if that weren’t the case, there was a strange revulsion we felt toward one other. It was like expecting a wild cat to be docile after stuffing it into a cage.

“Hey, hey, are ya ignorin’ me? You must be lonely. You’ve just met a fellow monster, and yet yer still ignorin’ him.”

“Sorry, but I don’t have the pack instincts of a dog.”

“I’m a wolf! Don’t fuck with me!”

I didn’t really see a difference between the two, but of course a lupine fallen beast would react this way when treated like a dog.

“Either way, us fallen beasts should each keep our stink to ourselves,” I put it bluntly.

The dog-faced wolf snorted, bored.

“Well, ya ain’t wrong about that…that’s why today I’m thinkin’ of havin’ my ladyfriends wash my fur for me. Look at ‘em, look at my ladyfriends. Look…ain’t they pretty?”

I attempted to leave, only to have him put an arm around my shoulders while pointing out his three female companions, who were frozen in fear. It was a pain, but it was silently understood that even though we didn’t get along, us fallen beasts would not oppose each other.

I obediently looked at the women that dog-face seemed so proud of.

Truly, they were pretty. They were all young adults, and, perhaps according to dog-face’s tastes, all possessed gleaming blond hair. Did he have some kind of harem? They didn’t seem like harlots—

It suddenly hit me, and my breathing halted momentarily.

“—Did you hunt them down?”

Hihihihiii… From dog-face’s mouth came an ear-splitting noise.

“Yeh. I hunted ‘em down. Those’re witches, ya know. I thought about takin’ em to the imperial capital ta get ‘em judged, but…judgements ‘re harsh. Don’t ya feel bad for ‘em? They’re so cute. That’s why I’m hidin’ ‘em.”

Gradually, all of the hair on my body began to stand on end.

He’d probably just gone to some village, made up some story about a witch amongst ‘em to use as a pretext, and had ‘em bring out their young women. If he’d told ‘em that he’d crush their village if they didn’t hand over the witches, there was nothing a farming village could have done to resist.

Fallen beasts are monsters, and monsters always prey on the weak.

“—Mercenary.”

Zero spoke up. *Shit*, I thought, and tried to shield Zero, but she was out of position. The moment he had realized he was hearing a female voice, dog-face had reached for her hood and torn it off.

“This one…”

“What the hell ’re ya doin’?! Don’t ya touch her!”

I ripped Zero free, pulled her hood back over her head, and hid her behind me.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey, what was that, where’d ya get her from? How’d ya get her? Did ya hunt her down? Did ya buy her? I ain’t ever seen someone that pretty. I want one too!”

Dog-face eagerly smelled Zero’s scent, and raised his eyes as if he’d realized something.

“—Don’t tell me, you—“

Did he realize Zero was a witch? I made a discontented noise in my head, and began walking while keeping Zero hidden. It would be a bad idea to stay here longer than we already had.

“She’s my employer. Don’t ya touch her like ya know each other. We’re leavin’.”

“Mercenary, those women are not witches.”

Zero’s voice was strangely loud. Zero pointed at the three frightened women and looked at me with a puzzled expression.

Do you understand? I can tell with but a glance that those women are not witches, she seemed to be saying. And—damn straight, I understood. Those women were not witches.

“Alright, let’s go.”

“But, mercenary.”

“I said let’s go—!”

“I am displeased!”

I flinched.

Those eyes and that voice. They were cold and hard, completely unlike the Zero who had been laughing but minutes earlier.

“…Me too.”

Warmth flooded back into Zero’s eyes as I muttered back to her. She may be displeased, but it’d be bad if we didn’t leave. To cause a ruckus here would mean trouble. If we testified that those women weren’t witches, the people from their village would confirm that they were. In that situation, suspicion would be cast on us.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey…that’s a false accusation yer makin’ there. Ain’t that right, ladies? You know sorcery dontcha? Ya know, the real reason I haven’t killed ‘em is ‘cause they used their sorcery on me, eh? ‘Cause if that weren’t true, then I’d ‘ve had my way with these cute girls ’n sold’ ‘em!”

“Mercenary.”

“Eh?”

“—Keep this between you and I.”

Smiling, Zero waved her finger once. In but a moment, they’d fallen out. All of Dog-face’s fur had instantaneously fallen out. A drenched fallen beast may look pitiful, but that didn’t hold a candle to how shameful a furless fallen beast looked.

Somehow I managed to stop myself from bursting into laughter, grabbed Zero, and fled the scene.

A moment later, dog-face's despairing yell set the air a-tremble. At that, my self-control finally broke, and I burst into boisterous laughter. Zero, with one arm around my neck, was cracking up too, hugging her stomach.

I wouldn't be laughing had our positions been reversed, but as long as I wasn't the victim, there wasn't anything funnier than this.

That night, dog-face shut himself in his room and refused to come out, as expected; moreover, the next morning, the three cute women he had been so boastful about abruptly vanished. I'll own up to meddling just this once in something that had nothing to do with me.

See, I *had* gone for a nighttime walk, and I felt like I remembered wrenching open some room's door in my half-asleep state—but that was probably just a dream.

More importantly, there was a personally urgent situation happing right now.

When I awoke in the morning, Zero, who was supposed to be in the single room by herself, was sleeping in my arms, with a justified expression on her face.

Of course my roommate Albus noticed this situation, and for some reason began attacking me. I had a torrent of abuse thrown my way as Albus called me a "brute", and "such a fallen beast". He'd then hurled a well-aimed chair straight at my head, which had been throbbing since early morning. This kid misunderstood a lot of things for someone his age, yet was somehow very attentive to detail.

"I told ya it was a misunderstanding. Anyway, why'd ya get so angry in the first place?"

"Shut up! Your head is mine! It's the worst for the owner of the head I seek as a sacrifice to act so unseemly, do you understand?!"

No, I don't understand. It was you who started hunting me in the first place.

"Look here, youngster. I have already spoken on this. Stop trying for his head."

Ah, a pretty woman and a handsome youth are arguing over me…it's dreadful, I ain't happy about it at all.

"It's fine, isn't it—? Just the head is fine!"

I ain't gonna give it to ya, I spat in my mind.

Ah—I wanna find the Book of Zero quick and be free from witches 'n sorcerers.

As I casually kept an ear on Zero and Albus' stupid bickering, we departed for the academy, leaving Foamicaum behind us.

Chapter 4

Chapter Four — Thirteenth

四章　十三番

Contents

Part 1

Volume 1 — Chapter 4: Thirteenth

Part 1

1

Settlements, whether entire countries or small towns, generally had a common feature: a core around which the establishment grew. To present an example, the vassals to the king resided in homes neighboring the imperial capital, and the servants of these vassals lived in residences neighboring their masters'. Likewise, stores lined the streets of dense, residential areas, and near these stores were situated merchants' homes and workshops.

Along similar lines, one could always find numerous smaller towns dotted around the outskirts of larger towns. Major cities were garrisoned with cavalry brigades for the purpose of maintaining law and order, namely by protecting their inhabitants from dangers, the first and foremost of which were bandits. Towns fortified by city walls, like Foamicaum, had little reason to fear attack. Villages and other meager settlements, however, had no such defenses. That's why they sought the peace of mind found in having a neighboring power who would protect them.

Our destination, too, belonged in the "defenseless village" category. According to Albus, the schoolhouse was in its vicinity.

"It's a little village called 'La Tête'."

The sandstone-paved path continued straight on toward the capital, Prasta. On the way were many branching pathways which, as I learned after checking my map, led to tiny villages and towns. Just as Albus had affirmed, this one stretched all the way to La Tête.

"It's a bit small, but the place sure feels alive! There's a bakery in La Tête that makes the best walnut bread around! The walnut's crunchy, the bread's real sweet, and when it's fresh out of the oven, it's fluffy and warm like you wouldn't believe!"

"I see…that is very intriguing," Zero muttered keenly. If half her brain was occupied by matters of sorcery and magic, then the other half had to be filled with thoughts of food. Actually, now that I thought about it, the fraction of her mind reserved for food was probably higher than that.

"Foamicaum was fun 'cause of how busy it was, but personally, I like La Tête better. Even if witch hunts were outlawed, I think that I'd still want to stay here. Maybe start a fortune teller's or something."

"Listen 'ere, boy. Seems ta me like you've forgotten, so I'll say it again. We're tryin' ta get to the academy. I get that ya like this town, but we ain't gonna stay 'ere for fun."

Albus angrily whirled on me after hearing my reminder.

"You think I would forget that?! I know we're going to the academy, and the academy's in La Tête!"

"Ain't the academy a hideout fer witches? 'S that mean La Tête's a witches' village?"

"No, it isn't," Albus sighed, exasperated. "The school's entrance is hidden in La Tête. It's

behind a pillar in the church, where nobody but witches can see, and protected by an impenetrable barrier."

"So you're sayin' that in the town…that in the church, there's an entrance to a witches' lair?"

"Yep. Putting entryways in towns was always a pretty common practice. I've heard about ones at the ends of alleyways, behind statues, even under beds in inns."

"U…under beds…"

I shouldn't overthink it. Getting scared out of my wits by alleys, statues, and the area beneath beds would be too inconvenient.

"We'll draw attention during the day, so we'll have to kill some time once we get to La Tête, at least until it's night. There's an inn in town, so it'd probably be a good idea to grab a room. They do keep a dog, but he likes me. He jumps on me whenever I come over to play with him, and the missus of the place gives me candy sometimes."

"She gives candy to a sorcerer…?"

"It's 'cause no one knows I'm a sorcerer," Albus said nonchalantly, shrugging.

Aren't ya scammin' 'em? I thought but didn't say out loud.

"Everyone treats me normally 'cause they don't know I'm a sorcerer. My mother used to be a witch too, but she gave up sorcery to marry a normal human. We were living in a humans' town, after all.

A witch that gave up sorcery to live as a normal human. I was, frankly, surprised that such a thing could even happen. What with that and Soulena's kindness, I guess I *had* been overly prejudiced against witches.

"…So, how're your parents doin' now? With yer mother bein' a former witch, life's probably tough."

"My parents, both of them, have been dead and buried for a long time… All because of a witch hunt."

Albus' voice became subdued. Just like that, shivers ran down my spine.

"It happened when I was just a kid. The townspeople discovered that my mother was a witch, and started a witch hunt in response. We'd been a happy family until then. —Ever since ancient times, the people of Vanias have relied on witches for help in their times of need. But despite that, the humans wouldn't allow witches to even get close to their towns, much less to let the witches depend on them for aid in return. My father tried to buy my mother and I time to get away, and died fighting the townspeople. My mother brought me to my grandmother's hideaway and escaped, but ultimately, she died too. That's how I ended up being raised by my grandmother. I remember almost nothing about my parents. And just to clarify, this all took place before the witches' rebellion. That was the reality of that era's so-called coexistence."

"…That's…humans sure are disgustin'…"

How are they not? I thought. But Albus's expression was complicated. He shook his head.

“That’s not it. Look, my father really loved my mother. He wasn’t even bothered by her being a witch. If I were to see all humans as disgusting, I’d be wronging my father. It’s not humans who are bad, but the fact that witches are branded as evil. We’re living in a world that blames witches for every misfortunate thing that happens. I might be fighting against humanity, but it’s not like I feel so disgusted that I’d want to kill each and every one of them.”

—It was as if Albus had become a full-fledged adult. My eyes sparkled as Zero laughed softly.

“If one cannot reason, one cannot perform sorcery. Although you seek what is beyond you, youngster, you are a fine sorcerer.”

And for a while afterward we made small talk, walking along the twisting and turning lane.

Part 2

Volume 1 — Chapter 4: Thirteenth

Part 2

Albus seemed his usual self as he strode along, swinging his arms, chatting about this and that in a lofty and loud voice.

Looking over the map, I saw that La Tête wasn't at all far from Foamicaum. It would take at most two hours for a horse-drawn cart to traverse the distance while going at a slow pace, and around double that for a person on foot. Since that was the case, it wouldn't have been weird to see more traffic on this route, but I hadn't encountered anyone else on our way here.

"Sure is quiet…feels like there ain't a person around."

That wasn't the feeling one should get in the vicinity of a town where people lived. Being near a town was usually reassuring; the vibe I was getting now was more disconcerting than anything. I had a bad feeling about this. The hair on the back of my neck prickled, and I began to feel uneasy; the closer we got to La Tête, the stronger that feeling became. My feet began to feel heavier and heavier with each passing step, as if my instincts were screaming at me to keep away.

Zero tugged on my clothes.

"—Do you sense it?"

She was sudden with her words. I grouchily scratched my cheek and looked around nervously.

It couldn't just be a figment of my imagination if even Zero was taking notice of it.

"I can sense a watchful presence."

It didn't feel like we were being watched, but I *was* vaguely aware of a watchful presence here. It was that kind of sensation. It felt as if there were a threat in the inky darkness of the forest, yet neither of us were visible to the other. Either way, *something* was there.

This oppressive atmosphere pressed in on us from all sides.

"Youngling. Has this place always felt like this? It seems to be quite gloomy for what is supposedly a small yet lively town."

Albus stopped in his tracks. He seemed baffled when he turned to face us.

"Um," Albus mumbled.

It looked like he had been talking so noisily in order to hide his own unease.

"Past this hill is the town…but there's usually a lot more people here, and it's usually a lot busier too…"

Albus' jaw clenched shut.

"I'm gonna go take a look!" He ran off. I knew something had to be wrong. The most suspicious thing about this place was the deathly stillness this close to a human settlement.

“What’re we gonna do, Ms. Witch? Is this a trap?”

“For whom? Me? Or, perhaps, for you?”

“You, ain’t it?” I answered after a short pause.

“Do you think that Albus informed his comrades of my search, and is now leading us into a trap in order to defeat me?”

“I don’t think so, but it sure is the first thing that comes ta mind. After all, he’s the one that’s led us into this situation.”

“I see, you used the process of deduction to arrive at that conclusion. However, your intuition is much more effectual at revealing the truth than either your powers of deduction or common sense. What is your intuition telling you?”

“To get outta here right this instant.”

“And to leave the young one behind?”

I was caught off guard when she asked that, because my instincts weren’t telling me anything of the sort. After all, if Albus had purposefully led us into a trap, then ditching him would of course be the correct course of action. But instead, my intuition was telling me to escape with him. Seeing my grimace, Zero’s eyes softened.

“Well then, let us make our exit. With Albus.”

“You sure it’s okay ta leave without gettin’ yer book back?

“It would be wiser to seek out Thirteenth first, if there seems to be danger ahead.”

“Alright, I gotcha. Oi, ki—“

“No!”

Completely overriding my call, Albus’ shrill yell sounded from some distance away.

For a moment startled into inaction, Zero and I ran up the hill together, where our field of view was vastly expanded.

“What’s wrong, kid? Did somethin’—“

Seeing the answer spread out below me, I couldn’t even form the word “happen”.

At the foot of the hill which we had just ascended, there was a small town. That was probably La Tête. Standout structures included the basilica in the middle of town and the town square itself, followed by a disorderly crowd of shops and homes of various shapes and colors, all bunched together. To traverse this town from one end to another would take no more than thirty minutes. I estimated the population of the town to be, at most, two thousand people. Compared to Prasta, which boasted a populace over fifty thousand strong, this place was no more significant than a backyard garden.

The cluster of buildings thinned as one moved outward from the center of town, until all that was left was sprawling pasture. And in these open plains—there was nary an animal set out to pasture.

It was clear that they had been attacked, and that the town known as La Tête was no more.

“No…no, it can’t be! It can’t be! It can’t be! It can’t be!”

“Oi, kid, wait for us! It ain’t safe!”

Even he himself most likely didn’t know why he was yelling what he was. As if stricken with panic, Albus bolted down the hill without a moment’s hesitation.

If the place’d been raided by marauders, some of them might still be there. Even assuming there weren’t any remaining adversaries, there’d definitely be filthy scavengers around scrounging for carrion. Either way, there’d be dead bodies. Albus might be a sorcerer, but be that as it may, he was still a kid. The town in its current state was no place for a kid.

“—For heck’s sake! What a brat!”

Exasperated, I gathered Zero into my arms and bounded down the incline. The eerie and uneasy atmosphere only intensified as we worked our way down the hill, and I broke into a cold sweat.

“Do not worry, mercenary. Do you remember what I told you?”

Tap tap, Zero knocked on my head.

“I shall protect you.”

I gave Zero a glance, tutting silently at her self-assured smile.

A few short words from a witch ain’t gonna make me feel relieved. Anyway, I could hardly be called a mercenary if I lowered my guard.

As I chased Albus into town, I saw that the devastation was far, far worse when viewed up close. Enough to make me grimace. I saw a demolished wall, a fallen sign—and all around I saw bodies, bodies, and more bodies. In the middle of all the blood and the dead stood Albus, dumbstruck, blank golden pupils fixated on the bodies strewn left and right.

“…Hey, don’t just keep starin’,” I said.

Albus started.

“Ah…”

“They probably got attacked by bandits. It’s rare for ‘em to be so messy…but I guess these people just got real unlucky.”

“Bandits,” Albus whispered, his eyes darting around in their sockets. His lips curled in derision.

“Do you see it?”

“See what?” I asked, looking at the dead body Albus was staring at. I didn’t see anything but a burnt corpse; most likely burnt alive. Although its features had been disfigured to the extent that I could no longer determine its gender, it was clear that the victim’s final moments had been a violent attempt to put itself out.

But something was off. The structures looked too clean for a town filled with blackened bodies.

Obviously, fire itself couldn’t just pick and choose who or what to burn; that’s why if even

one uncontrolled fire started, the rest of the town would go down soon after. Yet after seeing the corpses, it seemed that this fire had burnt only humans and nothing else. You could always count on humans to run around and panic when set aflame, spreading the blaze, but there wasn't a single charred home to be seen.

"Is this…magic?" I muttered. Zero nodded.

"I believe Flagis was the spell invoked. It is a spell that conjures fire which harms only your victim. As such, if summoned in a forest or hamlet, the conflagration would not spread. It seems quite clear to me that they were assailed by a witch."

A nearby town was attacked. I remembered hearing that at the gates of Foamicaum. Had the gatekeeper meant this one?

Part 3

Volume 1 — Chapter 4: Thirteenth

Part 3

I'd always known that witches were attacking villages to get back at the people of the kingdom. But seeing the devastation firsthand for the first time, I was shocked by the extent of the destruction.

The dead were littered about, and every home bore marks of pillaging. It was a scene of such ruination that the only possible explanation was that they had been attacked by magic-wielding vagabonds.

"The hell…? Ain't this town protected by witches from the Coven of Zero 'cause the entrance is here? What's the—"

"We aren't the only coven that uses magic," Albus said, subdued. My eyes grew into saucers.

It hadn't occurred to me that the Coven of Zero wasn't the only coven out there. I had assumed they were the ones to plan out the revolution against the kingdom of Vanias, and the ones ravaging its lands.

But after listening to and observing the human named Albus, I was convinced that the Coven of Zero fought solely to protect witches. Still, from the things I'd heard during my tenure as a mercenary and from the devastation I saw here in La Tête, I knew that there were, without a doubt, magic-using witches who massacred people and sacked towns with relish.

"You sayin' that there're other groups like the Coven of Zero?"

"No! Don't get 'em confused with us! Those guys are just thieves… they're here to steal the Book of Zero! They attacked the town to make a move on the academy in all the chaos!"

"Those guys are just thieves, ya say…but the Book of Zero's with the Coven of Zero right? No matter what they do, that bunch—hey! Oi, wait!"

Before I could finish speaking, Albus dashed off again, probably to make sure the academy was all right. I hesitated, then turned toward Zero, who had silently leapt to her feet.

"Hey—"

What do ya wanna do? What should we do? What's goin' on?

I was bursting at the seams with questions, but not a single word came out of my mouth. That was because Zero's expression was icy, and she herself seemed as immobile as a puppet.

"…Hello?"

"So it is also possible…to use it for this purpose…"

The dilapidated home, the fallen sign, the roasted corpses. Her eyes darted from one object

to the next as she mumbled sentence fragments.

Finally, she made as if to follow Albus, and slowly walked away.

Albus ended up running into a very old church.

I made my way through its gates, and entered the run-down chapel. Taking a look around, I saw that the normally neat seats were strewn around in a disorderly fashion, and glass from the windows was scattered across the floor. God's house was in a truly bad state. Even here, there were bodies. I gleaned from a cursory look that were six.

These remains, however, were different from those I had seen outside. Those were the bodies of people who had run for their lives and been slaughtered. These, though, were unmistakably the remains of combatants.

Around the necks of two of the bodies were chokers inlaid with brilliant vermillion gemstones, Exactly like the one Albus had. That being the case, those two were probably part of the Coven of Zero.

Did that mean the remaining four bodies were the assailants?

"Are these from the Coven of Zero…and those from the attackers?"

Albus nodded.

"Everyone in the Coven of Zero fought to protect the academy and the town…"

But they'd failed to save the townspeople. At least they'd fought to the last here, defending the academy.

"Did they finish each other off?"

"No, that is incorrect."

Zero then stepped forward abruptly, and headed right past Albus onward to the witches' corpses.

"Hey," I warned her, but Zero paid no heed and peered at the six bodies.

"The four invading witches first slew the two witches affiliated with the Coven of Zero. After the deed was done, another witch appeared and slew the invaders as well."

"How do you know that?"

"The natures of their deaths are dissimilar. The witches from the Coven of Zero show signs of having put up a fight, yet the four remaining witches appear to have died without time to react. Above all, it is the fact that all six have had their magic completely stripped from them that makes the involvement of a third party undeniable."

So apparently, a witch, belonging neither to the Coven of Zero nor to the attackers, had made an appearance here. This was just getting more and more perplexing.

As I racked my brains over it, Albus took a deep breath…

And spoke in a voice trembling with fear and fury.

"Thirteenth!"

I could swear that Zero and I were both thinking of the same question right then.

How the hell d'ya know that name, and why're ya using it now? But before I could voice my concern, everything changed.

The eye opened.

I instantly felt goosebumps spring up all over my body. The steadily increasing unease I'd felt while approaching the town was gone, but in its place was an intense, intimidating air, bordering on terror, fixated right on us.

Somewhere, the eye. Somewhere—

I looked up, and instantly regretted it. There was a single, titanic eye clinging to the ceiling of the church.

Part 4

Volume 1 — Chapter 4: Thirteenth

Part 4

The newly-opened fissure ran from one end of the ceiling to the other.

The bulging eyeball's gaze darted from me to Albus before coming to rest on Zero.

"That is quite the obvious surveillance mechanism. Mercenary!"

"Eh? Uh…oh!"

"This is a forced summoning! We will be launched away from here, so hold on to the youngster and take my arm!"

What's going on? What's she saying? Of course I couldn't understand. But I hefted Albus onto a shoulder and seized Zero's wrist, pulling her into my arms.

In a flash, the floor disappeared. Actually, no. This was—

The floor, the walls, and the room itself had all vanished. We'd been ejected into a gaping void. I couldn't help but scream.

—I was falling.

At this rate, I'm gonna die—

"Calm down, mercenary. You will be alright as long as you do not let go of my hand."

Zero's sleepy voice brought me back to my senses.

"Slow your breathing. Plant your feet, and feel the ground beneath you. Your body has already arrived. Bring your consciousness back into your physique. Focus on my hand."

As I took a deep breath, I realized that I hadn't been breathing. I felt the sensation of being in freefall fade away, and that I was indeed standing on something solid.

What was that just now? A hallucination? I felt extremely cold, and was trembling all over. Looking around, I saw that we were in a dark chamber, lit by four flickering candles. The pungent aroma of incense permeated the air. The floor beneath my feet was paved with flagstones. And in my arms was Zero. On that note, I remembered that Albus was still on my shoulder.

"Thank goodness! Mercenary's back, Zero!" Albus was clinging to my head.

—I'm back?

I took a look at my surroundings. I didn't see any reason to say I was "back"—

"Hey…where the hell 's this? Hold on a sec. We were in the church just a second ago…"

"That was a forced summoning—it is the power to ignore your target's wishes and forcibly transport them to another location. It seems that such a trap was laid at the chapel. It is a feat of sorcery repurposing the method of summoning a demon for use on humans, and I know of only two people who are capable of it. One of them is my mentor."

At that moment, I suddenly detected an unknown person's scent mixed in with the

overpowering incense.

They were a shadow in the darkness. Though I was alert to their existence, a slip of my concentration could cause me to lose track of them. They were that well-melded with the murky dark.

I couldn't see them, but I knew that they were there.

"And the other is Thirteenth—you."

Zero pulled her lips back into a smile.

Thirteenth, I mulled over the name in my head, befuddled, and nearly cricked my neck with the speed with which I looked up.

Squelch.

A figure of a man emerged from the gloom. Based off what I'd seen of Albus and Zero, I'd assumed that witches and sorcerers all had great looks. After seeing Thirteenth, that didn't seem to be the case at all.

He was tall enough to be a warrior, and endowed with solidly built shoulders. But thanks to a hunched back, he looked for the large part to be undeniably gloomy. His bangs were also unusually long, which served to curtain his eyes.

He was a large, sullen-looking man. Without a doubt, this was Thirteenth. I knew it was a bit weird coming from me, a fallen beast, but even with my inhuman face, I was still handsomer than he.

Looking directly at the man, Zero narrowed her eyes in challenge.

"Will you deign to explain yourself, Thirteenth? Why did you summon me?"

"I summoned, and you came as a result. That was the result, not my original intention."

"Then are you summoning every human that was there? That is quite troublesome. You have changed little, Thirteenth."

"It is because I heard my name being invoked, Zero."

From a break in the man's bangs came an adhesive-like gaze, which adhered itself to Albus. *Gulp,* Albus let out a small whimper and clung tighter to my head.

"In the chapel was the entrance to a dangerous coven's hideaway. After an attack by other witches, they seemed to evacuate, but I played by the book and stationed a surveillance eye there for a few days. That was when my name was called. Thus to see what it was about, I decided to summon whatever it was here."

"What if the one being summoned had no knowledge of sorcery? Had my mercenary been imprudent, he would have died."

Ah, so I had been close to death. It was clear to me now that Albus meant that I had escaped the clutches of death when he said that I was "back". I disliked this Thirteenth fellow already.

"That one with no knowledge of sorcery would enter a town with that many corpses strewn around, go toward the entrance to a witches' coven, and call out my name was

beyond my expectations. Besides, I had lit incense in advance. If it was needed, I had sound available as well. Even if the soul had gone to the other side, there would no trouble in calling it back. Now it is my turn to ask the questions. Why did you leave the cavern, Zero?" Thirteenth inquired in an accusatory tone.

Humph, Zero snorted.

"I had become just a bit bored on my own. I thought to take a stroll and to see your dreary face while I was at it."

"This is slightly far for a stroll…I told you it is dangerous outside. You promised to wait."

"Yes, my journey has been fraught with peril. No fewer than ten times have I been called a witch and chased around. Still, I learned. That is, danger is not unavoidable. That being the case, I may have wasted away centuries. Perhaps it would have been better if I had departed earlier for the outside. Do you not agree, Thirteenth?"

The base of my tongue went numb and ached from the strange tension in the air.

Part 5

Volume 1 — Chapter 4: Thirteenth

Part 5

What was going on here? Weren't Thirteenth and Zero comrades? She'd talked about him so endearingly, but now that they were face to face, she seemed murderous.

Suddenly—

"What's going on?"

Albus's voice grew soft.

"Zero…why…you're the one that wrote the Book of Zero…so why…why…" Albus was shaking. "Why do you know Thirteenth, the king's sorcerer?!"

The king's…sorcerer?

Confused, I looked to Albus for an answer.

"Hey, whaddya mean by 'king's sorcerer'? Are ya sayin' that the king of a country fightin' against witches is actually employin' one himself?"

"Exactly…Thirteenth helps hunt down witches. That guy's a traitor! He kills witches, even though he himself is a sorcerer!"

I'd wondered how the hell a country that wasn't allied with the Church could hold out in a conflict with witches—apparently they had sorcerers of their own as allies.

One thing that witches were highly skilled in was concealing themselves. When hidden, they were impossible to differentiate from normal human beings; even the Church, which warred endlessly against witches, found distinguishing them to be extraordinarily difficult. And so, people disturbed by this began to kill other perfectly normal humans under the pretext that they were witches, in order to reassure themselves. Between the number of human deaths caused by witches and those caused by humans acting out of fear and paranoia, it would seem that the latter was historically higher.

How could one solve this aforementioned problem? Simply by enlisting the aid of witches.

Zero had said that "magic leaves a trail," and considering that she tracked Thirteenth from the Forest of the Bowed Moon all the way to Vanias, this claim possessed a fair degree of accuracy.

Of course, the problem was that there normally weren't any witches willing to help out with witch hunts—though it seemed that there was one right here—though he was not technically a witch, but a sorcerer.

"But what the heck does a sorcerer have ta do ta get accepted by a country that's at war with witches?"

"Thirteenth did it by killing a massive group of witches in front of the king himself," Albus spat.

"Once, the Coven of Zero attacked the king. It was while he was out traveling, outside of

town. The war'd just started then, and we were running low on sacrifices, so we tried to get the king to ban witch hunts. Unfortunately, this was right after the Revels of Revenge. We weren't able to see eye to eye and got attacked by soldiers. We fought back, 'cause we didn't have any other choice…"

Pinch, Albus bit his lip.

"And then Thirteenth showed up and massacred all of the Coven of Zero members there. Just like that, Thirteenth earned the king's trust and joined the kingdom as a sorcerer who protects its lands."

It was a dubious story that both enlightened and sounded absolutely ridiculous. But since the people of Vanias had depended on witches for help in their times of need, it wasn't impossible that they were relying on sorcerers to hunt down witches, no matter how strange this strategy was. The answer to their prayers for a suitable replacement for the Church's aid had gallantly made its appearance onstage in their most perilous hour.

Thirteenth, who had been watching the exchange between Albus and I, seemed to lose his patience and slammed the butt of his staff into the floor. Albus flinched and looked at Thirteenth.

"Do not—speak Zero's name lightly. It is very displeasing."

Fwoop, all the fur on my body stood on end.

I got the same feeling I did back when I was being watched at the Church. The cool gaze Zero spasmodically exhibited was frightening, but the terror Thirteenth's gaze provoked in me was on a completely different level from the fear I'd felt from Zero's.

Zero harbored no malice whatsoever. She hadn't ever seemed intent on doing anything, so I wasn't scared of her. Thirteenth's eyes, however, were clearly filled with malevolence. He burned with murderous intent, and he seemed as if he was about to rush me.

His look told me that I wouldn't be able to match his power. The fear I that felt from being stared down by an opponent like this—

I knew it was pretty pitiful for a big guy like me to be scared silly, but I was far past the point of being able to put up a confident facade. Albus seemed to be just as scared as I was; he was shaking all over. If I took this guy off my shoulder and set him down, his legs'd just give way and he'd collapse onto the floor.

So I didn't do it.

"The Coven of Zero…? You employ Zero's name without the proper respect and defile it! This is an unforgivable crime. The fact that you people are suffixing your name with that of a witch of the murky black, who devours knowledge in a cave—it sickens me!"

Quickly, Thirteenth slashed at the air with a finger. In that moment I saw a cobalt light cut through the air and made to shield Zero and Albus with my body, back facing Thirteenth. I had no idea what kind of magic it was, only that it was meant to harm Albus.

However, no howl of agony came from between my gritted teeth.

Nothing happened. I hadn't protected them from danger in a heroic fashion—in fact, my actions were quite unseemly.

Embarrassed, I opened my eyes. That was when I gradually realized that Zero was poking out from behind my shoulder, and was facing Thirteenth.

“You…why—“

“I did say that this is my mercenary, Thirteenth. If you deal him even a single wound, I shall mince you into an offering for a demon.”

Zero’s hands were giving off coal-black smoke. She irritatedly shook it off and clapped her hands together, making a loud sound, to remove the soot that clung to her palms. I had felt like I’d saved them, but it seemed that I was actually the one who had been saved.

Part 6

Volume 1 — Chapter 4: Thirteenth

Part 6

I felt dejected. But a mere moment later, the tension in the atmosphere was again ratcheted up a notch.

“Do you believe you can, Zero? Our powers are not as they were during our rivalry ten years past.”

Thirteenth was fanning Zero’s flame. The color drained from Zero’s countenance, and a cold smile carved itself onto her lips.

“Then shall we test that claim, Thirteenth? I am just a hair displeased.”

I immediately took Albus under my arm and began distancing ourselves from Zero. As if Zero had been waiting for exactly that, her body erupted in ruby flame. This wasn’t a joke. No matter how many lives one had, it wouldn’t be enough to survive a battle between a sorcerer and a mage!

“H-h-hey kid! Can’t ya do anythin’ about this?! It’s really gettin’ outta hand!”

“I can’t do anything! The highest level magic I can use is Flagis! Against a witch who can summon an inferno at will and a sorcerer who has lightning at his beck and call, just a single touch from either’ll turn you to charcoal! If I had the time, I might be able to do something about it with sorcery, but…”

“We don’t got the time fer ya ta use sorcery! Yer so useless!”

“And you aren’t?! You can’t do anythin’ either!”

“Wha—ah fuck it, I’ll just try whatever comes ta mind!”

Desperate and with nothing to lose, I roared with all my might.

“Hey witch!”

At this point, I had only one thing to say that could possibly get Zero’s attention. It was completely stupid, but—

“It’s just about time for lunch! Settle this after ya eat!”

Zero stopped what she was doing after hearing my imbecilic message. The fire that had wreathed her body dissipated in a flash, and her head swiveled toward me.

“Lunchtime?”

“Yeah.”

“Food?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that so?” Zero muttered, turning to face Thirteenth.

“We cannot fight on empty stomachs, and it would be unseemly to strike when we are not both at peak condition. We can fight at any time, but that is not so for having a meal. So—

Thirteenth!”

“We have some quality cuts of lamb. I shall have a cook roast them for us,” Thirteenth nodded solemnly, as if to express complete agreement. He was no longer in battle stance either. Albus and I exchanged a look and clasped each other’s hands.

“I desire tuber soup.”

“Then I shall have them ready it.”

Zero and Thirteenth—who had just moments before been staring each other down, each radiating magical power so potent as to be visible—had agreed to a truce without a moment’s pause in between.

2

We had been transported from the church in La Tête to, of all places, the capital of Vanias: Prasta; specifically, a dungeon which had been repurposed for use as personal quarters. I really couldn’t believe it, but I couldn’t find any evidence to support my doubt. Zero’d said that “Thirteenth is in Prasta,” and Albus’d said that “Thirteenth is the king’s sorcerer,” so it was probably the truth. We were really in Prasta.

That meant that we’d moved instantaneously from La Tête to Prasta—well, it sure made travel real convenient. The risk of death was a whole ‘nother story though.

After ascending the staircase which led up and out of the underground chamber, I saw a robed figure, appearing to be one of Thirteenth’s underlings, shuffling toward us. He received instructions from Thirteenth, seemingly about preparing our meal, and shuffled off without a word.

Albus looked like he wanted to shout, but he also seemed to understand that making noise would only worsen the situation. He somehow managed to control himself and sat down at the table set out for our meal. As expected expected from a sorcerer who’s both a child and a self-proclaimed pragmatist.
The four of us, including Thirteenth, seated ourselves around the dining table.

On the two ends of the rectangular table sat Zero and Thirteenth. That left Albus and I to sit opposite each other. As one would expect, the atmosphere wasn’t conducive to amiable conversation, so everyone just sat in silence.

What could we talk about in those circumstances anyway? Only the sound of Zero cheerfully downing her soup added a bit of liveliness, but it only made the silence more noticeable.

“I could die from how unappetizing this soup is.”

The one to break the awkward silence was, of course, Zero, although this act of hers only made things more uncomfortable. My body went stiff, and I looked at Zero and Thirteenth.

“Even though the soup my mercenary makes is absolutely delicious…a cook’s livelihood is to cook, yes? But then, why, compared to mercenary’s soup…”

Part 7

Volume 1 — Chapter 4: Thirteenth

Part 7

Oi, cut it out, please stop talkin'. It's great that you're complimentin' me 'n all, but doin' it now an' in that way is just makin' this situation worse fer me. Ah, look, he's glarin' at me, ain't he? Thirteenth's glarin' at me, and he's lookin' really displeased. Or is that just how he normally looks? Either way, it's scary as hell.

"…I had them prepare it the same way we did in the cave. It is enough that it is edible," Thirteenth finally replied. His tone was less displeased than simply apathetic, and very eerie.

"You jest! I know that you're a lover of honey."

"That is because sugar is precious. However, there is no need to add pointless flavor and fragrance to tuber soup."

"It's fine to admit to liking sweet foods. Humans have a sense of taste. To ignore the pursuit of taste and abstain from the pursuit of pleasure is to disrespect demons. Isn't that right, mercenary?"

"Well…I…I think, s' long as it's good ta eat…"

Frankly, under these circumstances, I wouldn't have agreed with her even if the food wasn't tasteless. I couldn't have cared less if Thirteenth had a sweet tooth that made him go looking for honey every single night.

Zero pursed her lips and glared at me, looking annoyed, as if it were unimaginable for me not to support her. She seemed like she wanted to say that I was supposed to support my employer, but once I got the message across that I didn't want anything to do with it by avoiding her gaze, Zero turned away unhappily and tore into her lamb.

"Really…you have lived outside for ten years but are still as thickheaded as ever, Thirteenth. That said, what are you doing ordering people around like that? Get off your high horse. But no matter how much you try to be pretentious, it will not change the hard-headedness at the core of your being."

"Times change, Zero, and I will do what is most appropriate. If I do not behave as is expected in these times, I will only be regarded as odd, which is something I would much like to avoid."

The atmosphere felt strained. Very much so. I couldn't help myself but ask a question.

"So…y'know…you…you two are…friends, right…?"

"We are compatriots," Zero and Thirteenth responded in harmony. *Right, I get it now. Compatriots, eh? It's probably like the relationships between people assigned to the same troop in an army.*

"Oh…but that means you guys ain't enemies, yeah?"

"I did not feel that way, but this man summoned me, attempted to harm my mercenary,

and quarreled with me. Of course I am incensed."

"I did not mean to summon you, and my target was not your mercenary, but the sorcerer who sullies the name 'Zero'. It would not be my responsibility had the mercenary been harmed for attempting to shield the sorcerer."

"You are as adept as ever in evading responsibility are you not, Thirteenth?"

"I will receive your praise, Zero."

Silence resumed. Trying to escape reality, I looked at Albus. This kid had tried to take my head, but now he was the only one present who didn't strike fear into my heart. I saw that he hadn't touched any of the food arrayed before him. It wasn't because he wasn't hungry; his hunger was certainly making itself known.

"…Aren't ya gonna eat?" I asked. Albus scowled nervously at me.

"I can't eat this…what if he poisoned my food?"

"It ain't poisoned!"

"How you do you know?!"

"'Cause I'm a beast."

Albus looked blankly at me. Then, scowling at the table, he began to wolf down his food. And then—

"This is sooo unappetizing!" Albus yelled with all his might—while scowling at Thirteenth.

"Mhmm, mhmm," Zero nodded, satisfied. For a split second I wished to be as brave and reckless as Albus, but if I were, I'd probably have died a long time ago. Wild animals don't run because they're cowards. They flee because their danger-sensing instincts make them.

Thirteenth's face seemed drawn from Albus and Zero's round of "unappetizing", but I wasn't sure if it was a hallucination caused by my fear. No. Looking at how he raised his arm listlessly and called over the server, I couldn't blame it on my imagination.

Before long, a small plate was placed in front of us. What seemed to be baked sweets were arranged upon it, but their surfaces glittered with sculpted candies.

Sugar was a fairly high class product. Candy made from boiled-down sugar was not eye-catching, but when that candy was sculpted, it became the food of the nobility. *Is this revenge for the complaints that meal was unappetizing?* I didn't know whether or not he was planning to bring this out after the meal anyway, but…

As if she'd never seen baked sweets before, Zero nonchalantly took one from the plate, saying "at best, it's just another tasteless food," and delivered it to her mouth. In that moment, she froze.

As it turned out, "smiling like a blooming flower" wasn't merely a figurative expression. The fact that I had the impression that she was normally expressionless and cold also added to that effect, lending Zero's smile an almost lethal intensity.

After looking at Albus and annoyedly at me, she began stuffing her cheeks with the sweets. It appeared to be an overwhelming victory for Thirteenth.

“—So,” Zero heaved a contented sigh and pushed aside the plate. She seemed to be in a good mood.

“Shall we hear your story, Thirteenth? Why did you, after leaving the cave in search of the book, decide to amuse yourself in such a strange way by becoming the king’s sorcerer?”

“That is because the thief employed the most effective tactic. The person who stole the book had already spread the knowledge of magic throughout this kingdom of Vanias, and riled up the fiendish organization called The Coven of Zero in order to enmesh the kingdom in panic and chaos. There were many witches who would resist my recapture of the Book of Zero, and I was but one person. So, I made a proposition to the king: I would aid the witch hunts in exchange for his assistance in finding the book. That was a year ago —even now, I have yet to recover the Book of Zero. That is my tale.”

“Don’t spout that bullshit! You’re the fiend!!” Albus yelled. He slammed his fist into the table and stood up forcefully, sending his chair crashing to the ground.

“The Coven of Zero isn’t a fiendish organization. All we do is protect witches from witch hunts. All we do is attack towns that decide to burn witches at the stake, and save witches who’ll be killed! What do you even mean that your book was stolen?! The Book of Zero was written by that person—”

At that point, Albus seemed taken aback, and stopped speaking.

—The Book of Zero wasn’t written by “that person”.

Albus already knew that. In that case, was “that person” given the book by Zero? And if not, then did they steal it?

Albus glanced at Zero. His eyes seemed to be pleading for help, but Zero said nothing.

“We…didn’t mean for the kingdom to fall into panic and chaos…”

“But the country *has* fallen into panic and chaos.”

In contrast to Albus, who was drained of all vigor, Thirteenth’s cool voice radiated confidence.

“You lot speak about creating peace for witches, but you kill humans for that cause? If witches win this struggle, the only thing that will remain is despairing fear toward witches. Peace cannot be achieved in that state.”

“It’s not like we started killing humans first—”

“But humans are dying. Do you not think of the lives of the humans killed when witches are being saved?”

“We’ve got no other choice, don’t we?! This is war. Humans haven’t stopped killing witches, so we have no choice but to kill humans in return!

“Well then, can you say definitively that you aren’t killing any humans other than those who’ve killed witches? That you haven’t delivered false justice? Do you believe that yourselves and only yourselves are righteous? That’s why this war began!”

Those were the words I spoke to Albus right then. War begins with revenge for an act of revenge. *We feel the same way, don't we, Thirteenth?* But it would be cruel to try to make a kid understand that.

Part 8

Volume 1 — Chapter 4: Thirteenth

Part 8

Albus' eyes swam with tears, on the verge of overflowing. Then Thirteenth dealt the final blow. It seemed like this man knew not the concept of mercy.

"On top of all that…reports have been received from every corner of the kingdom regarding attacks and looting by witches. Of course they come from villages and towns completely unrelated to the witch hunts. Witches are killing people innocent of any and all wrongdoing, just to loot their possessions—don't tell me you didn't know."

The destruction in La Tête naturally floated to the front of my mind. Nothing Albus could say would change the fact that witches had pillaged and slaughtered. I hadn't heard the specifics back then, but—

"That's not the Coven of Zero! Those are the exiled, wayward sorcerers—"

"Wayward sorcerers?" I asked. Albus' shoulders trembled. I hadn't meant to intimidate him, but I couldn't deny that my tone had been a bit severe. Albus'd told us that there were other covens, but the words "wayward sorcerer" didn't mean that they were part of some other, independent coven. That they were wayward indicated that there was a coven they had formerly been a part of.

"I told you already that the Coven of Zero will teach anyone magic, even if they're homeless…or an orphan…right?"

"I see…so it's like that."

I wasn't sure how those alleged other covens picked up magic, but I could understand if it was because they'd been part of the Coven of Zero but left to do as they liked.

So the dead witches in La Tête's church, both the attackers and the attacked, were basically all of the Coven of Zero. That being the case—the reason La Tête was raided and destroyed was because of the Coven of Zero. Seeming to understand this, Albus' expression became strained.

"There were some people who abused the power of magic the moment they learned it. People like that were banished from the academy to prevent them from learning new magic, but we couldn't stop them from using what they'd already learned, so…"

To be expected. By giving strength the likes of which no normal human could withstand to people like those, who'd been powerless and persecuted, it should have been plain what the results would be.

"So they became bandits 'n pillaged as much as they liked, yeah?"

Albus nodded reservedly.

It was like giving deadly explosives to a bunch of dumb kids.

Magic, through the medium known as the Book of Zero, was indiscriminate of the place and people to whom it was disseminated to. Even if the Book of Zero were reclaimed, as

long as there was a written copy, it wouldn't be enough. Even if there wasn't a written copy, as long as the first page still existed, it wouldn't be enough. It was like mixing ink and water. Water made cloudy by ink wouldn't be able to become pure water again.

"The witches who attacked La Tête were wayward sorcerers too, I'm sure of it. Those banished dirtbags banded together and attacked the academy. They were probably trying to steal the Book of Zero to make themselves stronger…"

In other words, among the witches of this kingdom, there were three great forces at work.

First was the Coven of Zero, which fought to realize halcyon days for all witches.

Second were the wayward sorcerers who'd learned magic in the Coven of Zero, and were now running amok.

Third was the sorcerer who belonged to the kingdom and indiscriminately hunted and killed members of the other two parties—otherwise known as Thirteenth.

There were probably also forces in this kingdom who didn't have any interest in learning magic or waging war, but since they weren't involved in this conflict, it should be fine to just ignore them. Just the classification of witches already made my head hurt, so if the number of groups that used sorcery kept increasing like this, I'd be hopelessly lost.

"Organizations not under the jurisdiction of the government are not organizations at all. They simply obtained a fun little toy, the Book of Zero, and did whatever they liked. They must be purged of that, assembled, and governed. Order must be restored."

Thirteenth stood up silently.

"There is use for you yet. It would be a waste of talent to simply kill you. Obey me, cooperate with me completely, and I promise to grant you even more knowledge and power."

Albus was lost for words.

"That's—"

"If you refuse, then it's off to the stake with you!"

I too was speechless.

I felt like I should get up but couldn't find a reason to. I looked toward Zero, but far from stopping Thirteenth, she didn't show any interest in the subject at hand.

Well then, I guess it falls to me.

"Burnin' at the stake…he's still a kid ya know?" I said. *No one's so heartless as to show no mercy even to children.*

"He might be a child, but he's still a threat if he is capable of sorcery. And because he is a child, if he wields that power without prudence, he must be destroyed."

Thirteenth's riposte was smooth, but I held on.

"Maybe so, but yer still gonna kill him?"

"Then would you pardon him because he is a child?"

“Well…”

“Each and every person who works with sorcery is waylaid from the human path. And any and all who are waylaid from the human path will receive the power that is sorcery. Sorcerers are those who will fulfill your wishes in return for proper compensation. Sorcerers are those who will kill people at the requests of people. Be it man or woman, adult or child, a sorcerer is such a creature, but not a human. That’s all there is to it, Zero’s mercenary. Besides, it is strange for a bestial warrior to be advocating for a sorcerer in the first place.”

Facts, facts, and more facts. I clenched my jaw, saying nothing in response.

True, Albus did try to take my head. He basically tried to kill me. I’d been able to survive so long because I was a fallen beast, and because I encountered Zero. If I’d been just a normal person and hadn’t met Zero, I’d have been killed by Albus a long time ago. No, if I’d been a normal human, I would never have been targeted in the first place, but—

I took a sidelong glance at Albus.

I could perceive the fear and confusion in those normally-twinkling golden eyes. There, anger and hatred mingled, and they were glaring, barely, at Thirteenth. Albus’ rage was somehow propping him up. I didn’t care if he was a sorcerer or whatever else; he was still a kid.

I was at a loss for an answer to the question of whether or not I would pardon him for being a child—but would I *kill* him for being a child?

I don’t mean to make myself seem like a saint or anything, but even as a mercenary, I would hesitate to kill a kid.

“Contemplation is important. Take a night to think about it. …Zero—”

“What, do you want a rematch? I do apologize, but I don’t feel up to it on a full stomach.”

“Return to the cave.”

“I refuse. I waited. I waited, but you did not return. This is the result. This is how I feel now.”

“Zero, I—“

“About that, Thirteenth.”

Zero spat out the fork she had been holding with her mouth, and it made a noise as it clanged against her plate.

“It is taboo for witches to hunt witches. No matter how justifiable a reason you may have, that disturbs the order of the world. When too much power is given to one person, that power will drive them mad. I suspect that you know what I am talking about, Thirteenth. The six witches at the church—they were all empty shells. It may be to retrieve the book, Thirteenth, but you have crossed the line.”

“Once the book is retrieved, everything will be finished. So, Zero—“

“That is why, Thirteenth, I will be searching for the book with my own hands,” Zero quietly declared, interrupting Thirteenth.

“The book is my possession. My book, my crime. If I must dirty my hands to deal with it, Thirteenth, then I choose to soil my hands.”

“No, Zero!” Albus gave a sorrowful cry. “You said that you were our ally, didn’t you?! We went to the academy together, and you said that you were our ally…so—”

“I have not said a single word about being your ally.”

Albus’s eyes widened in blank amazement.

“But,” he quivered in a small voice.

“I asked you to take us to the academy because you told us that you knew where the book was. That is all.”

Albus looked at me. —As if he were pleading for help.

Unfortunately, as Zero’s mercenary, I’d become Albus’ adversary in this matter. Those were just the facts.

Part 9

Volume 1 — Chapter 4: Thirteenth

Part 9

“You’re on our side, aren’t you?” Albus asked. Zero said nothing in response, but merely held a poker face. I quickly followed suit. I wasn’t going to spill the beans on information my employer didn’t want to make public.

Seeing that I hadn’t said anything either, Albus bit his lip and hung his head.

Sorry ‘bout that, Albus. I’m not tryin’ ta say that ya fooled yerself into thinkin’ that she is. I just can’t give you a straight answer. Fuck, I feel disgusted.

“…You weren’t lying…when you said the book…really *was* stolen from you…?”

Zero didn’t even nod, only narrowed her eyes in acknowledgement.

“What I said is the truth. However remarkable the witch you call ‘that person’ was, they, the founder of the Coven of Zero, thieved that tome from me. Robbed—may be the more accurate term.”

“Robbed…?” Albus turned pale.

“The thief murdered every single witch in that cave, leaving only two of us alive—Thirteenth and I. They robbed us of the Book of Zero and stole the techniques of magic to spread it far and wide.”

Albus’ face fell, and his head slumped to the table. Through my years as a mercenary, I’d seen this moment—the moment when a person’s spirit is broken—many, many times before. His soul was crushed.

“—Hey, Miss Witch. Why’d ya write that book? Were ya tryin’ ta destroy the world?”

This was something I’d been wondering for a while now. That is, why did such a fearsome book exist at all?

My past self might have thought it was obvious that it was because witches were trying to bring about apocalypse. But having met Zero, I couldn’t imagine her being interested in something so bothersome.

“…Because it would be handy to be able to start fires without flint…?” Zero repeated, with a slightly biting tone, the point she had earlier brought up so cheerfully.

“Because it would be handy to be able to hunt with an unending supply of arrows. Because it would be easier to catch dinner without needing to braid rope. Because without having to climb trees to gather fruit, because without having to get stitches for wounds—“

“Everyone would be happy, I thought.” Zero laughed softly.

Hers was the face of a child lost in reverie.

“So it is also possible to use it for this purpose,” Zero had said, after seeing the destruction witches had wreaked upon La Tête. It had been beyond imagining for her.

Zero had thought of little else but the blinding future that could be created by using these

powerful techniques in a most benevolent manner.

New innovations are always born out of pure passion and humble ambitions, yet once they are born, they escape the control of the inventors and are spread like pollen across the land. Even among beneficial creations such as herbal medicines, each has variants which are lethal if overdosed and which the minds behind the medicine itself never intended to create.

“This youth expressed his desire for humans and witches to coexist. I am of the same opinion. The repetitive talks I had with the witches in the cave, who shared the same values and knowledge as I did, and only buried themselves in books as I did, were quite boring. I wanted to leave for the outside world, but the world said that we witches were evil. If only I could devise a helpful technique—one that could be used by all, not just witches—then the world would surely welcome and accept us.”

But if people could light fires ablaze without need of flint, then the stones would stop selling. If everyone had an endless supply of arrows to use, then the craftsmen who made bows and arrows would be out of jobs. There’d be a bunch of people who wouldn’t be so happy, I thought vaguely.

But furthermore, there was indeed some truth to her words. If only magic were used righteously. If only magic were used not to deal wounds, but to protect and to save.

“—That line of thought was why I wrote that tome, but I should not have done so.”

“Zero.”

Thirteenth’s voice rang out. Zero glanced his way and silently shook her head.

“I should have heeded your advice, Thirteenth. I should have burnt the grimoire to cinders the moment you warned me of its apocalyptic potential. It was I whose will was too weak. I—“

Zero breathed a deep breath.

“I was foolish.”

3

I lay idly in an empty room set aside for the serving staff. I had resigned myself to being relegated to a bed of straw in the stables, being a lowly fallen beast, so this was a luxury I had not expected.

In contrast, Albus had been temporarily relocated to a dungeon cell. He was to stay there for a night, and decide whether his fate would be the stake or subordination to Thirteenth. Normally you’d pick the latter, I suppose. He now knew that the person who founded the Coven of Zero was a chronic scumbag.

The question for me was what I would do after this. I was to be Zero’s guard, and she was to return me to a human form. Of course my future actions would depend on Zero’s, but those were entirely unpredictable.

Still—for some reason, it felt like my work was done here.

I was never that extraordinary as a mercenary in the first place. Zero’d hired me because

I’d been in the right place at the right time, and because I had a conspicuous figure. Now that she had Thirteenth to watch her back, what good could it do her to keep a mercenary like me by her side? I would dismiss myself if I were her.

Holding my hand up toward the ceiling, I examined a minute cut on my thumb.

It was nearly healed, but the scar Zero had left after biting my finger was still there.

Back then, Zero really did need someone to serve as her guard. But I doubted that I had been anything more than just a distraction for her even then.

Zero had tossed aside Albus with lightning speed after he had served out his role as guide.

What did that mean for me?

When I am no longer necessary, what will Zero do with me?

I slowly withdrew my hand and shut my eyes in silence. When suddenly—

“Zero’s mercenary.”

“Whoaaaaah!” I yelped, falling off the bed. Surprisingly, I had heard a voice come from close by.

I was usually acutely aware of human presence, and could hear footsteps from a mile away. Because of that, I nearly died from shock when the voice suddenly sounded right beside me. It was a matter of life and death.

“…Huh?”

But unless a face was going to poke its way out from under my bed, I couldn’t see even a shadow of a threatening presence. I could swear on my life that I’d heard something, but the owner of the voice was nowhere to be found.

Was it just my imagination? I’d heard it pretty clearly though…

Then, a mouse scuttled up onto the bed.

No way. No, could it be?

“Zero’s mercenary, I would like to have a word with you. Come to the basement.”

“M-mou—“

The mouse is talk—

“You may follow this mouse. Come. I will be waiting.”

Having delivered its brief message, the mouse began scampering away, leaving me no time to even shriek.

Part 10

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Volume 1 — Chapter 4: Thirteenth

Part 10

He wants me to follow it? How does he expect me to do that?! It's a talking mouse, for fuck's sake. It's way too creepy.

But as I stood there, I noticed the mouse staring at me from its place at the door, waiting. Its unnerving gaze was not to be understated, despite being a mouse, and it seemed to be commanding me to hurry up and open the door.

"Ah… ta hell with it! What've I got ta lose?!" I roared with undue ferocity and shoved open the door, staying one step behind the mouse.

We left the servants' quarters and headed down a hallway until we emerged into a courtyard.

As I raised my eyes to gaze at the castle, I thought that it resembled a gigantic rectangular mass of stone.

I had no doubts that it was a near-impregnable fortress. Its ramparts were works of masonry, and the chinks in its armor were reinforced with alabaster. From the corners of the stronghold rose four soaring spires of considerable height, which would make for fine vantage points during dire times.

Were I to be tasked with bringing down this citadel, I would surely shed a tear.

Partly out of habit, I ran through possible invasion routes in my head as we ran alongside the ramparts and made our way behind the fort, whereupon I saw a well-worn wooden door set into the castle wall. It seemed that through the door was the citadel's interior. The mouse squeezed through the gap under the door, which swung open easily at my touch, and as I advanced through the portal, I saw a descending staircase lit by torchlight. Seeing my hesitation at the prospect of going underground, the mouse squeaked in impatience.

"I get it! I'm comin' down right now!"

As expected, Thirteenth was waiting there in the basement. *I was at the point where I could expect these things?*

This wasn't the vast underground chamber we had been summoned to, but rather a normal —although I'm a bit reluctant in calling it that—room with a lived-in feel.

There were many bookshelves and lots of paper, and in the middle of this disorderly yet orderly room sat Thirteenth stiffly in his chair, looking very much like an evil sorcerer.

The mouse scurried into the chamber, crawled up onto Thirteenth's shoulder, gobbled up some crumbs of bread, and scampered off elsewhere.

"Was that your first time seeing a familiar?"

Thirteenth looked with somewhat sleepy eyes at the mouse.

"Sorry for frightening you. It was my mistake to treat you as I would a sorcerer."

"Oh, yeah…it's fine…you can control animals?"

“So long as they are mentally inferior,” Thirteenth responded succinctly. He stood up as if it took him much effort.

“You have been of great help to Zero. I called you here because I thought I would reward you for your work. —Here, take this.”

Thirteenth reached for an object casually placed on his desk, and held it toward me.

—It was a small bottle. There was nothing strange about it, just a cylindrical bottle stoppered with a cork.

“That’s…“

“I call this magic medicament. It is an application of Zero’s magic. It’s a solution composed of the offerings and methods required for magic, dissolved and sealed in plant oils.”

“Explain like I’m a moron.”

“If you uncork the bottle and water the ground with its contents, the magic sealed within it will take effect.”

My jaw dropped. That meant—in other words, something like—

“Could anyone use magic if they had that? Even me?”

“That’s right. Anyone can.”

My eyes opened wide in surprise. I didn’t accept the bottle from Thirteenth, but merely stared at it in his hand.

Seeing my astonishment, Thirteenth went on.

“It’s nothing to get so worked up over. As of right now, I am the only one able to make this. I continued my research on the side while searching for the book, and spent ten years to produce this innovation. If I were to keep this a secret, it may even be that no one in the next hundred years will be able to make this. Besides, this one is a harmless magic medicament.”

“Ha…harmless ya say?”

“It erases the effects of sorcery.”

I suddenly felt a sort of affinity with the contents of the bottle, and took it from Thirteenth’s hand.

“Why sorcery and not magic?”

“Magic is a simplified form of sorcery. At its heart is still a reliance on the power of demons. In other words, this bottle’s contents can annul both magic and sorcery. For example, if you happened to be trapped in a magic circle, the magic medicament would cause it to lose its power—“

Thirteenth looked me dead in the eyes.

“And were you possessed of that body, you could become human again.”

Slowly, I understood the meaning of Thirteenth’s “gift”.

“You sure understand the contract between the witch and I well, don’tcha?“

“I can just about imagine what else besides coin could cause a bestial warrior like yourself, who’s afraid of and holds contempt for witches, to work for one.”

“Are ya really alright with givin’ this to me? If ya do, I’d have no reason ta stay her mercenary.”

“I did say that I would reward you. In essence, I mean this—leave the castle this instant.”

“…What? Whaddya mean? You don’t got the right to dismiss me.”

“I’m telling you to run. Zero is a terrifying witch. You may be fooled by her pretty face, but she is not someone you can safely accompany.”

“As you can see, I’m completely fine. That, and she told me she ain’t interested in my head.”

“Have you ever thought about why?”

I blinked.

—Why Zero didn’t want my head?

“When Zero invented magic, she summoned forth what could be termed the highest-ranking demon there is, and learned the names of a great deal of demons. In summoning such a powerful demon, what do you think Zero used as an offering?”

“You’re askin’ me…”

Thirteenth gave me a look, like he was telling me to stop feigning ignorance.

I rubbed my neck absently.

“I don’t believe that you think of yourself as a special existence to Zero, yes? To Zero… no, to all sorcerers, every person or thing besides themselves are nothing but objects to be used and expended. The only reason you are still alive and breathing today is because you have a use that requires you to remain this way. Once that use expires, you will become a mere apparatus for use in sorcery.”

Did she really need me?

If she had no need for me, what was Zero—what was the witch going to do to me?

Thirteenth had tacitly foisted the answers to these questions upon me, presenting them as obvious fact.

Sometimes, Zero would develop a frigid expression. Chills ran down my spine each time I heard that Zero mutter “I am displeased” in that emotionless tone.

No, but still—I’d trusted in my abilities and decided to accompany Zero.

“If that woman really was dangerous, a fallen beast like me’d never stay by her side. We’re way better at sensin’ danger than people are.”

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